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Exploring the Impact of Meaningful Employment upon the Identity and Desistance Process of Young Offenders

Rebecca Jayne Oswald

PhD

2020

Exploring the Impact of Meaningful Employment upon the Identity and Desistance Process of Young Offenders

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the award of Doctor
of Philosophy at the University of
Northumbria at Newcastle

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Arts, Design and Social Sciences

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Abstract

Understanding youth desistance and the factors that can support it is very important to reduce the persistence of offending into adult criminal careers. Research regarding the relationship between employment and desistance demonstrates mixed results and consequently scholars question whether perhaps only a certain ‘type’ of ‘high-quality’ work might promote desistance. This thesis investigates whether ‘meaningful work’ - a concept that has primarily been examined in occupational psychology - can be a potential precursor for youth desistance.

This thesis utilises a case study of the Green Light social enterprise, which provides outdoor employment for offenders aged 16-18. The experiences of twenty-three employees of the Green Light were examined through participant observations and semi-structured interviews. A document analysis of young people’s records held by the Youth Offending Team was also conducted. Data gathered regarding the young employees was supplemented by semi-structured interviews with Green Light supervisors.

The results demonstrate that, firstly, young people with a history of criminal involvement have specific criteria for ‘meaningful’ employment. Young people’s conceptions of meaningful work differ from that specified in existing research in occupational psychology, which has largely been conducted with adult professionals. This therefore reveals the limits of the scholarship in this area; it does not fully resonate with diverse groups such as the participants in this study. Secondly, the findings demonstrate that those youths who found meaning in their employment at the Green Light developed a stronger pro-social identity, aiding their desistance. This therefore indicates that engaging in meaningful employment can be important for youth desistance. However, the findings also suggest that not all young offenders find inherent value in legitimate employment and their social network can play a key role in whether participation in work will aid pro-social identity construction and desistance.

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Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this thesis has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee on 21st March 2017.

I declare that the Word Count of this Thesis is 78912 words

Name: Rebecca Jayne Oswald

Signature:

Date: 29th May 2020

1. Introduction

Understanding desistance is vital for criminal justice policy. Knowledge of the various factors that can influence an offender to refrain from offending can be used to shape and refine criminal justice efforts to encourage desistance. This should facilitate reductions in reoffending levels. In particular, understanding youth desistance from crime is important. Recent statistics show that 39.2% of juvenile offenders reoffend within 1 year of being cautioned, convicted or released from custody (Ministry of Justice, 2020). This is considerably higher than the rates of recidivism for adult offenders (at 28%). Moreover, the comprehensive review of the youth justice system in England and Wales conducted by the Ministry of Justice in 2016 found that whilst levels of youth offending had decreased overall, youth reoffending had increased. The review concluded that the young people remaining in the youth justice system today are the most persistent and troubled offenders (Taylor, 2016). Yet despite reports from government that youth reoffending is a problem, amongst the burgeoning field of desistance scholarship there has been very little dedicated research on desistance in children and young people. Therefore, it is very important to investigate which factors can support youth desistance, in order to improve the lives of young people and reduce the persistence of offending into adult criminal careers.

1.1. The Green Light¹

In October 2016, I was given an opportunity to conduct a research project with the ‘Green Light’ (GL) social enterprise. The GL provides employment opportunities for young people (aged 16 to 18 years) who have already completed, or are in the process of completing, their sentences with the Youth Offending Team (YOT). The purpose of the GL is not to act as an alternative to conventional methods of justice. Rather it is to give those youths who have been entangled with the youth justice system an opportunity to rebuild their lives and reduce their chances of resuming offending through engagement in employment. The GL currently operates in five locations in the UK. All of the GL enterprises are closely affiliated with the YOT in their area.

The young people involved in the GL participate in six months paid employment. All the work that the GL youths undertake is outdoor work. This work can be divided into commercial, environmental and heritage work, as displayed in table 1.1.

¹ Pseudonym used in place of the name of this social enterprise

Table 1.1 Green Light work examples

Commercial	Environmental	Heritage
Painting Fencing Small-scale demolition Building steps Vegetation management Allotment clearance Paving Grass cutting	Building habitats Removing plastic tree guards Waste removal from becks, rivers, streams Flood maintenance Litter picking Tree planting Flower planting	Specialist brick cleaning Dry stone walling Erecting tourist information signs

Young people work approximately 30 hours a week. For risk management and mentoring purposes they work in small groups – a maximum of five young employees and the supervisor. Thus, the GL is a transitional step, helping young people who have often been excluded from school for a number of years and who struggled to maintain a place on subsequent education, training or work programs, become attuned to working and having a more routine and structured day again. Their placement provides considerably more individual support and is not as demanding as usual full-time employment. Some GL sites offer the opportunity for youths to gain a qualification during their time working. For example, some GL youths have gained a City & Guilds Level 1 in Land Based Operations, NVQ Diplomas in bricklaying and plastering and the Construction Skills Certification Scheme Card.

Young people are selected for the project by the YOT and GL supervisors. To be eligible young people must have been/currently be under the supervision of the YOT. Generally, participants must also not be considered a risk to others to partake in the scheme. However, the YOT and supervisors do aim to choose those young people who are most likely to benefit from the scheme, and have few other options to enter into employment/training. Thus, all the GL employees have multiple convictions and often have other issues that would limit their chances of gaining employment elsewhere, such as chaotic home lives or a history of prolonged disengagement from school.

A mixed methods analysis of this social enterprise was undertaken by Long et al. (2019) and they found positive results in terms of desistance. They followed the offending records of 39 youths over a period of 10 years. This sample included 14 young people who attended the social enterprise and a control group of 25 youths who were referred to the YOT but did not enter into the employment scheme. These groups were matched by risk score, age, gender and ethnicity. Long et al. found that participation in employment reduces the number of offences an individual commits; those youths employed by the social enterprise committed 1.12 fewer offences per quarter than the control group. In addition,

offending rates among the employed youths decreased by 0.99 offences per quarter after they began work. Long et al. also conducted a qualitative analysis, to understand why the social enterprise appeared to be successful in promoting desistance. They held semi-structured interviews with four young employees and their supervisor. Young people expressed that working a relatively high number of hours keeps them busy and out of trouble. Moreover, young people stated that they benefitted from doing environmental work that provides them with a level of civic engagement. Long et al. concluded that employment programmes can be a hook for change in the lives of young offenders.

However, these qualitative findings arose from a small sample of youths from a single cohort. Further research is required into the relationship between employment and youth desistance. Thus, this thesis seeks to expand upon Long et al.'s (2019) preliminary findings.

1.2. Summary of project and research aims

In the literature on employment and desistance, evidence of causality between these two factors is mixed. There is evidence that employment can aid, inhibit and have no effect upon desistance (Farrington, Ohlin and Wilson, 1986; Rand, 1987; Sampson and Laub, 1993; Graham and Bowling, 1995; Wright, Cullen and Williams, 1997; Piquero, MacDonald, and Parker, 2002; Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002; Wright and Cullen, 2004; MacDonald, 2007; Savolainen, 2009). Scholars suggest therefore that only certain forms of employment promote desistance. For example, Uggen (1999: 127) stated that 'meaningful' work might be necessary to promote desistance from crime. However, the criminological literature does not go beyond this. It fails to specify what exactly 'meaningful' employment is to offenders, and how it helps them desist.

In order to find a detailed account of meaningful employment it is necessary to turn to organisational psychology literature. Experiencing meaning involves the feeling that our life has 'purpose, significance, and coherence' (King, Heintzelman and Ward, 2016). The literature in this field specifies that there are certain organisational practices that typically generate meaning for employees. In particular, employees have found work which 'does good' for others, has opportunities for personal achievement and learning, provides interesting work tasks, allows for self-determined working and promotes social bonds amongst co-workers, is more meaningful. Please see further definitions of meaningful employment in sections 1.4 and 2.3. *Prima facie*, the work young people engage in at the GL corresponds with much of the criteria for meaningful employment specified in occupational psychology research. However, this does not mean that the young employees of the GL would automatically find their work meaningful, as such literature also states that

experiences of meaningfulness are necessarily subjective (King, Heintzelman, and Ward, 2016; Wrzesniewski, 2003). Furthermore, research in this area has largely been conducted with adult professionals, rather than young people with limited experiences of employment. Consequently, this thesis explores which organisational practices young attendees of the GL find meaningful.

How might engaging in meaningful work enable desistance? Occupational psychologists suggest that finding meaning from our employment can influence our identity because it provides a sense of purpose that affects who we see ourselves as (Ashforth, 2001; Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016). This reference to identity is crucial, as a concept that is central amongst criminologists' theorising surrounding desistance is that of 'identity reconstruction'. It has been reported by many scholars that the process of desistance involves the offender reconfiguring their self-view and having a new conceptualisation of the person they wish to be (Maruna, 2001; Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002; Farrall and Calverley, 2006; Vaughan, 2007; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009; Copp et al., 2019). Although the form that this reconstructed identity takes has been debated in the literature, generally it appears to involve seeing oneself as a non-offending member of conventional society. The formation of this identity supports desistance because continued involvement in criminal activity would naturally be incongruent with the new person the offender sees themselves as. However, it is also acknowledged in the literature that offenders are unlikely to change their identity at will; identity is conditioned by each individual's social context (Rumgay, 2004; King, 2012; Munford and Sanders, 2015; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). Scholarship purports that offenders cannot conceptualise 'replacement selves' without an opportunity being available within their immediate social setting to 'act out' this alternative identity - Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph (2002) term these 'hooks for change'.

Thus, the organisational psychology literature reveals that experiencing 'meaning' from our employment can affect our identity. Criminological literature describes how a shift in identity can aid desistance, and that identity change is influenced by factors external to the individual. Therefore bringing this diverse literature together, I hypothesise that engaging in meaningful employment can aid desistance because of its impact upon offenders' identities. I suggest that because engagement in meaningful employment is considered a 'pro-social' (see definition below) activity that it might aid the formation of the necessary pro-social identity for desistance. Nonetheless, there has yet to be any research investigating this proposed connection between meaningful employment, identity reconstruction and desistance. Therefore, the purpose of the thesis is to explore the utility of this hypothesis,

generated out of existing literature from different disciplines. Specifically, the research aims for this project are:

1. To establish young offenders' conceptions of meaningful employment
2. To investigate the extent to which the GL social enterprise fulfils young offenders' criteria for meaningful work
3. To assess the impact of engaging in meaningful employment upon young offenders' identities
4. To determine the impact of engaging in meaningful employment upon young offenders' desistance process

To achieve these aims I conducted research with GL schemes in Landington, Telville and Wheatburgh². A primarily qualitative research design was chosen for this project, as the aim was to collect rich information surrounding the main areas of study in a reasonably unstructured manner. In particular, I attended GL worksites in Landington, Telville and Wheatburgh at regular intervals throughout the young people's six-month employment to conduct participant observations. I also carried out semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with young employees in order to gather more detailed information about their experiences during their placement. I held interviews with young people on their first week at the GL, three months in, on their last week and six months after completion of their employment with the GL. The longitudinal design of the project allowed me to follow in interviews the young people's evolution as they progressed through the GL scheme. In the interviews, questions were designed to explore identity development among the young participants and the nature of meaningful work and how it may aid desistance. The design of these interviews was sufficiently flexible to also allow for the exploration of other sub-topics within the broad themes of investigation. There was always the possibility that young people may not experience the work as meaningful, that meaningful work may be aiding desistance by another means than identity transformation, or simply that these concepts may interact in a different way to that conjectured here. The research design allowed for this, both in how data was collected and how it was analysed. Another method I used to collect data was a document analysis of participants' YOT records. These held information on young people's personal histories and their official offending records as recorded by the police. Finally, data gathered regarding the young employees was supplemented by semi-structured interviews with GL supervisors.

² Names of cities have been replaced with pseudonyms to aid anonymity

Overall, in exploring the impact of meaningful employment upon the identity and desistance process of young offenders, this thesis uniquely integrates literature from the fields of criminology, psychology and business. The originality of this project further lies in its exploration of young offenders' conceptions of meaningful employment. Organisational psychologists have primarily focused on the employment experiences of non-offending adults. Criminologists have suggested that 'high-quality' work might be required for desistance but have not considered what such work means to young offenders and how it might help them turn away from crime.

The following sections in this chapter consider the definitions of the key concepts that are utilised in this thesis. The chapter concludes by detailing the structure that the remainder of the thesis takes.

1.3. Defining Desistance – termination vs. process

Reaching a consensus as to the definition of 'desistance' is particularly challenging as there is no unified or accepted definition. One of the main debates concerns whether an individual must have terminated all criminal activities to be considered a desister. The Oxford English Dictionary states that the principal meaning of the verb 'to desist' is to 'cease or stop'. However it is also mentioned that there is a lesser known or rarely utilised meaning for the term which is to 'abstain or resist' (SOED 2002: 654). These two strands of definition largely reflect the debate in the criminological field as to how best to classify this term. There is a divergence between those who define desistance as the complete cessation of offending and those who define desistance more fluidly, as the process of abstaining from crime, where periods of reoffending may occur.

Desistance literature

In early desistance research, 'desistance' was conceptualised as a termination event, as illustrated by Shover's (1996) definition: 'the voluntary termination of serious criminal participation'. Indeed Sampson and Laub (1993) suggested that the word 'termination', rather than 'desistance', should be used in order to accurately reflect the concept that was being described. The problem however is that 'termination' effectively takes place all the time, the moment the offender completes their criminal act. Thus for those who define desistance this way, there is then disagreement as to how long the period of non-offending must be for the offender to then be considered to have 'desisted' from crime. For example, various researchers have defined desistance as no offending for: 12 months (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2016; Bachman et al., 2016), 2 years (Farrington and Hawkins, 1991), 3 years (Gunnison and Mazerolle, 2007) and even 10 or 15 years (Shover and

Thompson, 1992; Mischkowitz, 1994). Indeed, it may be that to truly satisfy this definition of desistance, it would need to be shown that the offender had not offended again within their lifetime i.e. it could only be determined in retrospect, after the offender had died. However a series of studies have shown that after approximately 7-10 years of non-offending, the risks of an ex-offender reoffending are the same as those of a non-offender (Kurlychek, Brame and Bushway, 2006; Blumstein and Nakamura, 2009; Soothill and Francis, 2009; Bushway, Nieuwbeerta and Blockland, 2011; Weaver, 2018). Thus, perhaps this might be a safe time-period after which to declare an offender has desisted.

However, there are many who feel uncomfortable with conceptualising the stopping of offending in such a static form. Defining desistance as a state of being when an individual has completely ceased criminal activities necessarily implies that in one moment a person is an offender and in another they are a desister. It raises questions over whether such a change in behaviour can really be captured in a single event. Therefore it was articulated by Fagan (1989) that desistance should be depicted as constituting a fluid process of abstaining from crime over time, rather than as a precise status after a circumscribed period of non-offending. However it was not until several qualitative studies in desistance revealed that the majority of offenders describe becoming a non-offender not as a smooth and instantaneous transition, but rather an on-going process and struggle, with numerous setbacks and relapses (for a full account see Halsey, Armstrong and Wright, 2016) that this way of defining desistance became more commonplace. Indeed, Maruna (2001) argued that desistance should be reframed, as a process of ‘refraining’ from criminal activity in the face of life’s obstacles.

Quantitative researchers of desistance also began to appreciate this more nuanced meaning to desistance and developed more elaborate ways of measuring this concept. Previous studies essentially resorted to splitting their sample into two time periods and categorising those who offended in the first section but not in the second as desisters. However, scholars such as Bushway, Thornberry and Krohn (2003) developed a trajectory method that could chart and model an individual’s offending behaviour over time. In order to recognise a process of desistance in such a model there needed to be at least one of the following: a deceleration in the number of incidences of offending, a reduction in the severity of criminal activity or a narrowing in the variety of offending behaviour. Thus, desistance is measured as a gradual reduction in an individuals’ ‘criminality’ (Bushway et al. 2001).

There are then discussions amongst scholars over which part of the desistance process is the most important to study. Maruna and Farrall (2004) make a distinction

between what they call ‘primary desistance’, which involves initial lulls in offending behaviour and ‘secondary desistance’ which involves the longer-term maintenance of non-offending. They state that criminologists should not be interested in short-term respites from crime but rather should focus on charting secondary desistance, the process by which individuals often assume the identity of a ‘reformed person’ (Maruna and Farrall 2004: 174–5). However, this is not a universally-held view; King (2013) found that offenders begin to construct non-criminal identities in the primary desistance phase, earlier than previously suggested by Maruna and Farrall. Healy and O’Donnell (2008) stated that because of this more attention should be paid in future research to these early forays towards desistance.

This study

It has been highlighted by Uggen and Massoglia (2003) that considerations of how to define desistance must necessarily be driven by the theories thought to govern desistance by the researcher. As ‘identity reconstruction’ is a key theoretical underpinning of this project, this necessarily requires desistance to be defined as a process. It is widely recognised that to reconstruct one’s identity takes time. For example, Paternoster and Bushway (2009) state that the realisation of the costs of crime and that one must change one’s identity is very gradual, and not a sudden ‘epiphany’.

However, I have also chosen to define desistance in this way because I believe it can more accurately capture some of the complexities involved in understanding ‘stopping’ offending. As found by Maruna (2001), desistance is very rarely binary; one is not either fully immersed in the law-abiding world or the criminal world. Thus, Maruna, when attempting to compare the narratives of desisters and persisters, was forced to deliberately over-sample at opposite ends of the desister-persister spectrum. In particular, he found that whilst some individuals may be desisting from the most serious criminal activities, they could not be said to be completely law-abiding. This is therefore a reason why it is more prudent to conceptualise desistance as a process, rather than the complete cessation of offending. Whilst desisting individuals may move generally in a law-abiding direction, many still oscillate on a continuum between criminality and conformity (Bottoms et al., 2004).

Indeed, to completely abstain from illegal activity is highly unlikely in any individual. Self-report studies demonstrate that the majority of society has engaged in criminal activity. For example, Johnston, O’Malley and Bachman (2002) revealed that almost all of their sample of 43,700 adolescents had partaken in some form of delinquency. Indeed, as stated by Moffitt (1993), rates of illegal behaviour soar so high during adolescence that participation in delinquency appears to be a normal part of teen life. Desistance can therefore be conceptualised as reaching (or going through a process towards

reaching) a pattern of behaviour that resembles an acceptable level of conformity for someone of a certain age, gender etc. in a particular society at a specific point in time. It necessarily follows therefore, that the meaning of desistance substantively depends upon social contingencies, such as who the label is being applied to and whom is applying the label upon another. Ultimately, it is far easier to take into account these complexities if desistance is conceptualised as a fluid process over time, where there is no set end goal but rather where what we are looking for is a notable change in offending behaviour.

Therefore, in this thesis, I define ‘desistance’ as a process of abstaining or refraining from criminal activity over time. This definition of desistance also informs my quantitative research. When analysing the offending records of the young participants in this study, I evaluate if there are any notable changes in their offending volume, frequency and seriousness, both during their placement with the GL and for a period of six months after its completion.

1.4. Other important definitions

Beyond desistance, there are several key concepts that require further clarification in this study.

Identity:

Identity is largely concerned with the ‘self’, and indeed these terms are often used interchangeably (see Burke and Stets, 2011 for a more detailed discussion of the differences between self and identity). For the purpose of this thesis, identity can be understood as the reflexive questioning of the self – it involves the actor consciously reflecting upon the answer to the question ‘who am I?’ (Mead, 1934; Heshmat, 2014). Identity is frequently described as a ‘cognitive process’ which is ‘internal to the individual’ (Bachman et al., 2016; Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002; Le Bel et al., 2008). Therefore, we can understand that the formation of an identity is something that occurs within the individuals’ mind. It is a subjective process involving the interpretation of our inner self.

However, whilst identity exists ‘within the person’ (Le Bel et al. 2008) it is also something that we actively perform to others in our social interactions. Goffman (1956) details how individuals will present a certain ‘self’ in the presence of others; they dramaturgically perform their identity in a certain way depending upon the situation and audience. He defines ‘impression management’ as the desire to manipulate others’ impressions of us by choosing a particular setting, appearance or manner. Thus, as Harris (2011) describes, one may have an ‘institutional self’ that they portray to others, and a ‘real

self' that is only performed when the actor is alone. Goffman (1956) makes a similar distinction, though he terms these as 'on-stage' and 'off-stage' selves. Yet others argue that even the real, off-stage self is influenced by social interactions; how we think others view us will shape how we view ourselves, what Maruna et al. (2004) describe as the 'looking glass' self-concept. Thus, our interactions are particularly important to the construction of our identities. Indeed, Kirkwood (2016) states that to understand how identity operates separate from the social context in which it is produced is unwise. Therefore, we can understand that identity is a fluid and malleable understanding of 'who am I'; it is constantly reconstructed in response to external stimuli. One's 'self' evolves as we go through our lives, interacting with different people and situations; it is shaped by our experiences.

Identity also involves time. Unamuno (1913) proposed that identity emerges from a sense of temporal continuity between the past, present and future. As Giddens (1991) states, identity is a reflexive project, it involves understanding our life as a cohesive whole. A particular focus in identity is upon the future, the 'self' that we are striving towards. This frames how we understand the narrative or 'life script' of our past (Maruna, 2001; Vaughan, 2007). Therefore, although identity is fluid and fragile, in the sense that it changes in response to external environmental forces, this is not to say that it is fleeting, for it also requires the maintenance of a coherent - though ongoing - self-story, that we (both metaphorically and literally) tell ourselves and others about who we are (Stevens, 2012). It also must adapt so that it can incorporate the events of the external world into the ongoing self-narrative.

Our identity should be understood as distinct from personality traits, which are generally viewed as relatively stable over time (Caspi, 2000; McCrae et al., 2000; Caspi, Roberts and Shiner, 2005; Rocque, Posick and Paternoster, 2014). As described above, identity mutates as we enter new social roles, which change how others see us. It can also change from our own intentional actions – thus, identity also involves agency. We can actively work towards an envisioned appealing replacement self that we wish to be and we can actively choose how we perform our identity – provided, of course, that our social situation allows this (Blumer, 1969; Stryker and Serpe, 1982; Kihlstrom, Beer and Klein, 2003).

On a final note, it is important to understand that our identity, or who we think we are, has generally been found to be consistent with our actions and decision-making (Burke and Reitzes, 1991; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). For example, Rise, Sheeran and Hukkelberg (2010) found an average correlation of 0.47 between self-identity and behavioural intentions. Indeed, it is because of this reported connection between identity and

actions that criminologists began to research offenders' identities as a potential source of explanation for their criminal behaviours (Maruna, 2001; Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002; Farrall and Calverley, 2006; Vaughan, 2007; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009; Copp et al., 2019).

Pro-social:

Frequently in this thesis, I refer to the term 'pro-social' when describing young people's identity development. Although the use of this term is very commonplace in the identity and desistance literature, finding a definition proved to be difficult. In most articles, 'pro-social identity' seems to be used synonymously with 'non-offender identity'. The term is also often extended in the literature to refer not just to identity, but activities, behaviour, attitudes and institutions. In these incidences it can also be assumed that 'pro-social' is meant to refer to that which is non-delinquent and non-illegal. However, does this mean that any behaviour, values or identities which are not favourable to delinquency can be automatically labelled as 'pro-social'? Some research studies imply that something more might be required. For example in Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph (2002: 1048) a participant's partner who was 'a real goody-goody' with 'high principles' and who was a 'workaholic' was described as being pro-social. Moreover, in Le Bel et al. (2008: 137) examples of a pro-social identity were 'good parent' or 'provider'. Furthermore, Maruna (2001) found that a pro-social identity involved 'giving something back to society'. Does 'pro-social' therefore have to be that which involves doing good or helping others? This would be supported in the field of social psychology, where Twenge et al. (2007) and Gino, Desai and Simpson (2012) both define pro-social behaviour as actions which individuals deliberately undertake to help or benefit others, citing examples of donating blood or doing voluntary work.

However this definition is not universal, as some argue that pro-social behaviour involves obeying society's rules and conforming to socially accepted behaviours; one does not necessarily have to go over and beyond to help others to be 'pro-social' (see Baumeister and Bushman, 2007). Indeed, frequently given examples of 'pro-social' institutions in the desistance literature are marriage and employment. Thus, it can be understood that in this way 'pro-social' is a label for that which follows the social rules (both formal and informal) of mainstream society and hence the term can be used somewhat synonymously with 'conventional'. This definition will be used throughout this thesis. A 'pro-social' identity therefore does not necessarily have to involve being someone who acts for the benefit of others, but it should involve being a person which the majority of society consider to be socially acceptable. For example, being an 'offender' or a 'drug addict' is seen by most in society as a negative identity, whereas being a 'worker' or a 'father' is largely seen as a positive or pro-social identity.

Meaningful employment:

Experiencing meaning in our lives is described by many in the psychological field as essential to healthy psychological functioning and human flourishing (Frankl, 1992; Ryff and Singer, 1998; May, Gilson and Harter, 2004; Routledge et al., 2011; Allan, Duffy and Collison 2017). Yet, surprisingly few define what experiencing ‘meaning’ actually is. The most definitive definition I found was by King, Heintzelman and Ward (2016: 212). They define meaningfulness as the feeling that our life has ‘purpose, significance, and coherence’. They explain that purpose refers to having goals and direction for our lives. Significance entails the degree to which a person believes his or her life has value, worth and importance. Coherence allows life to make sense to the person living it. Therefore, experiencing meaningfulness can essentially help answer a broader existential question about the purpose of one’s existence, i.e. it helps us make sense of ‘why am I here?’ (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003). As we all desire the feeling that our lives have a purpose and that we ourselves are worthwhile, a number of scholars state that the need to understand the ultimate purpose of our lives is an integral part of human existence (Routledge et. al, 2011; Healy, 2014). It means that the demands faced in our lives are perceived as being worthy of energy investment and commitment (Korotkov, 1998).

Employment can engender meaning in two ways. As explained by Steger, Dik and Duffy (2012) an individual can find ‘psychological meaningfulness in work’ to the extent that work has personal significance. It aligns with and fulfils the individual’s own ideas of what is important in life. If there is such concordance, one will judge their work to matter and be meaningful. Additionally, an individual can also find ‘meaning making through work’ where the work itself makes a broader contribution in finding purpose/significance/coherence in life. Meaningful work can help an individual deepen their understanding of themselves and the world around them, facilitating their personal growth. Meaningless work is therefore often associated with apathy and detachment: it neither aligns with one’s ideas for their purpose in life, nor is it a source of greater meaning in one’s life (May, Gilson and Harter, 2004).

Young offender:

Throughout this thesis, I try to use the term ‘young offender’ scarcely, instead referring to the participants of this study as ‘young people’, ‘GL attendees’ or ‘employees’. Whilst all the young participants have significant criminal histories, I recognise that overuse of this term is problematic. The participants in this study are sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, friends, girlfriends, boyfriends; they have aspirations, fears, hobbies, talents, interests etc. To label them solely by the occasions they have broken the law is unfair, stigmatising and dehumanising. Furthermore, as some young people were not actively offending during their

employment at the GL, it might seem inappropriate to refer to these individuals as young offenders. Indeed, the term recommended by The Fortune Society (2019) ‘youths with prior justice system involvement’, may have been more appropriate for these participants. However, this was not always practical in instances where the term needed to be repeatedly used – its lengthy repetition would have detracted from the meaning of my work. Moreover, occasionally the use of the term ‘young offender’ was necessary, particularly where in this thesis I am discussing young people in relation to their offending behaviours. The rationale of this project is to greater understand what can help youths stop offending. It is their offending behaviours – rather than all the many other types of behaviours that they are involved in – which are primarily my focus.

1.5. Structure of thesis

The following two chapters of this thesis outline the literature and theoretical underpinnings that the research aims of this project are based upon. **Chapter 2** reviews the literature investigating the relationship between employment and desistance. I suggest that, because of the mixed findings in this area, only a certain ‘type’ of employment might help young people turn away from crime. As the criminological literature is vague beyond this point, I turn to occupational psychology literature to explore the concept of ‘meaningful employment’. I create a typology of the features of employment that have typically been found by researchers to evoke feelings of meaningfulness. The chapter then considers the extent to which the case study in the project, the GL scheme, can be classified as ‘meaningful employment’. **Chapter 3** contemplates how meaningful employment might aid desistance. I highlight the occupational psychology literature that discusses the relationship between experiences of meaningfulness and identity. I also explore ‘identity reconstruction’ as a theory of desistance in criminological literature. This establishes that the formation of the necessary identity for desistance requires not just a cognitive re-formulation, but also a change in external social factors. I therefore propose that participating in meaningful employment might aid desistance because of its effect upon the offender’s identity.

Chapter 4 discusses the methods used to explore the areas under investigation in this study. I describe how the GL social enterprise operated as a case study in this project. I detail how a combination of participant observations, semi-structured interviews and document analysis were used to gather data, and how this data was then analysed to achieve the research aims. Furthermore, I highlight the difficulties faced during data collection and analysis, the lessons learned and the limitations to the research methods. In particular, a section is included where I am reflexive about my positionality and how it may have impacted upon the way in which data was gathered and analysed.

The thesis then contains three findings chapters. **Chapter 5** presents the findings regarding young offenders' conceptions of meaningful employment. I outline the extent to which the typology of meaningful organisational practices I constructed in chapter 2 met young people's criteria for meaningful work. I also consider other organisational practices participants described as engendering meaning in their work that were not specified in existing research. By doing this I create an updated typology of organisational practices that young offenders find meaningful. Throughout this chapter, I also discuss the extent to which the GL scheme met young people's criteria for meaningful work.

Chapter 6 outlines the findings surrounding the impact of meaningful employment upon identity. I conduct a detailed analysis of young people's narratives at the beginning of their employment, mid-way through, at the end of their employment and six-months later. I consider how participants tell stories of past events, how they present their current self and how their plans for their future develop, as an indication as to whether identities changed. Moreover, in this chapter I contemplate whether any observable changes in identity can be attributed to participation in meaningful employment at the GL. I seek to clarify how partaking in meaningful employment can influence young people's identities.

Chapter 7 discusses the findings regarding the impact of meaningful work upon desistance. I present data from young people's official offending records, their self-reported offending and supervisor reports of offending. In accordance with the definition of desistance outlined in chapter 1, I utilise this data to divide the participants of this study into desisters and persisters. I then seek to establish the extent to which participation in meaningful employment and the ensuing development of a pro-social identity can account for young people's desistance/persistence. However, in doing this I recognise that other factors are relevant to participants' desistance/persistence, beyond the concepts of 'meaning' and 'identity' that were the focus of this study.

In **Chapter 8**, I draw the findings together and discuss the key conclusions of the thesis. I consider the value of exploring meaningful employment with young people with a history of justice involvement, as a very different population to that used in previous research. Furthermore, I discuss how the concepts that were the focus of this study - meaningful work, identity and desistance - appear to interact in the findings. I recognise that this interaction is more complex than initially anticipated and that other - particularly relational - factors play a key role in pro-social identity formation and desistance. This chapter also acknowledges the limitations to these findings. Finally, **Chapter 9** concludes the thesis by summarising the key conclusions and considering the implications that these may have for academic theory, policy makers, criminal justice practitioners and third sector

organisations. A case is also made for further research that could be conducted based upon the main inferences presented in this thesis.

2. Employment and desistance: exploring ‘meaningful’ work

2.1.Introduction

Can engagement in employment aid desistance? This is a complex question to answer, as research displays evidence that working can aid, inhibit and have no effect upon the process of stopping offending. This chapter includes an overview of this literature. The mixed findings in this area suggest that only a certain *type* of employment might assist desistance. I therefore draw upon the concept of ‘meaningful’ employment, which originates from organisational psychology literature, as a potential type of employment that might aid desistance. From a review of the scholarship in this area, I create a typology of organisational practices that employees have typically denoted as generating meaningfulness in their work. The chapter then considers the extent to which the case study in the project, the GL scheme, can be classified as ‘meaningful employment’.

2.2.Does employment aid desistance?

A correlation between employment and levels of criminal activity is a widespread finding in the criminological literature. In particular, research finds that unemployment is a typical characteristic of those who offend. For example, MacDonald (2007) discovered that the majority of young offenders experience recurrent episodes of unemployment. Moreover, Fergusson, Howard and Woodward (2001) found that criminal behaviour in young adults is associated with unemployment following school leaving. Likewise, Farrington, Ohlin and Wilson (1986) and Crutchfield and Pitchford (1997) observed that proportionally more crimes were committed by youths during periods of unemployment.

Research also shows that offenders who enter employment are more likely to desist. For example, Sampson and Laub (1993) examined the life trajectories of 500 delinquent men and 500 non-delinquent controls and reported a connection between employment and desistance. They theorised that social bonds to law-abiding adults - such as employers - act as an informal social control over the individual. Furthermore, Mackenzie and De Li (2002) found that offenders committed fewer crimes during periods where they were employed. The increase in social bonds formed from working was associated with desistance. Moreover, Wright and Cullen (2004) studied a sample of youth in New York and found that gaining employment was associated with reductions in criminal behaviour and drug use. They explained that this was because bonds with co-workers disrupted previously established delinquent peer networks. In addition, Savolainen (2009) found a correlation between engagement in employment and desistance. They reported that the transition from joblessness to work reduced recidivism by 40%.

Can we conclude from the above studies that employment produces desistance? It would appear not, as others have found that employment has no impact upon desistance (see for example Rand, 1987; Graham and Bowling, 1995; Piquero, MacDonald, and Parker, 2002). Moreover, some researchers report that engagement in employment can actually increase offending. For example Horney et al. (1995), in addition to finding no consistent reduction in offending during months when former prison inmates were employed, discovered that property offending was actually significantly higher during periods when offenders were working. Additionally, a series of US studies found that engagement in employment whilst in high school increases the risk of delinquency (Bachman and Schulenberg, 1993; Steinberg, Fegley and Dornbusch, 1993; Wright, Cullen and Williams, 1997). However, Paternoster et al. (2003) later contested these. They found that any effect of youth employment on offending disappeared once pre-employment differences between youths who worked and those who did not were taken into account.

Employment ‘programmes’ for offenders also appear to produce inconsistent results in terms of desistance. Wilson, Gallagher and MacKenize (2000) conducted a meta-analysis which evaluated 33 work programmes for US probationers and prisoners. Overall, they found that participants in these programmes recidivate at a lower rate than non-participants. However, the evidence was insufficient to conclude that work programs reduce reoffending because there was large heterogeneity in effects across programs, suggesting that some may be highly effective, whereas others may have no impact upon future offending behaviour. Visser, Winterfield, and Coggeshall (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of evaluative research into US non-custodial employment programs for individuals with a criminal history. Despite 6000 young and adult offenders having participated in such schemes, the analysis showed that overall employment-focused interventions do not reduce recidivism. Very few of the work programs they surveyed demonstrated a causal impact on re-arrest.

Some UK employment programs fare slightly better. Table 2.1 below presents a sample of these, including the case study of this project, the GL. This table also includes the reported impact upon reoffending of the schemes. Unfortunately, these studies have used varied methods of calculating reoffending rates, and therefore cannot be fairly compared. However, it is worth acknowledging that the overall proven reoffending rate (youths and adults) is 28.7% (Ministry of Justice, 2020). As demonstrated in table 2.1, most of these projects achieve reoffending rates which are significantly lower than this, suggesting that they may be aiding desistance. There are also numerous UK programmes that do not offer employment or training opportunities as such, but rather assist and support offenders to obtain full-time employment. For example, St Giles Trust helps offenders to overcome personal barriers and access employment and training opportunities. It reports a reoffending

rate of 19%, which is considerably less than the national average (Davies et al., 2016). For other similar programmes see also - Apex Charitable Trust, Building Lives Training Academy, Changing Paths, SOVA, Trailblazers and Working Links.

Table 2.1 Employment schemes for offenders

Name	What it does	Reoffending rate
Aspire	<p>Employs offenders and other vulnerable individuals. Examples of services offered:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grounds maintenance and gardening • Textiles, furniture and office waste recycling • Removals • Cleaning, painting and decorating 	1% reoffended (Aspire, 2017)
Blue Sky	<p>Employs teams of 4-5 offenders to complete an outdoor work placement. Examples of services offered:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sport turf maintenance • Wild flower meadow planting • Waste and recycling services • Graffiti removal • Pest control • Fencing 	31% reoffended ³ (Ministry of Justice, 2013a)
Cleanstart	Employs offenders for six months to clean and clear Trafford Housing Trust's empty properties to make them ready for new tenants.	10.5% reoffended (Baker, 2014)
Landworks	Provides outdoor work placements for offenders. Offenders often involved in artwork and creative work using natural materials.	4% reoffended (Landworks, 2018)
The Green Light	<p>Provides six months employment for offenders aged 16-18. Examples of services offered:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clearing waterways • flood defence work • household and industrial waste clearance • basic construction work 	6% reoffended (Long et al., 2019)

³ this can be compared to 43% reoffending for a matched control group of offenders with similar characteristics (Ministry of Justice, 2013a)

Overall, while the research reviewed above generally supports the idea that engaging in employment *can* reduce crime, it is clear that the relationship is quite complex and more research is needed into what types of employment can support desistance, and under which conditions. As stated by Wilson, Gallagher and MacKenzie (2000), what is needed is research that clarifies the links in the causality chain between employment and recidivism. A focus is needed on *why* programs work, not just whether they work. This study presents such an analysis.

2.3. Meaning and Employment

An interesting suggestion by Uggen (1999: 127) is that ‘quality’ work might be necessary to promote desistance from crime; indeed, he states that this might be more important than the presence or absence of employment. Uggen based this assertion upon an evaluation of the National Supported Work Demonstration Project, which indicated that those given low-quality jobs (characterised by skill level and industry) were no more likely to desist than a control group who did not attend the project (Uggen, 1999). Participants selected into high-quality jobs (characterised by skill level and industry) however, reduced both economic and non-economic criminal behaviour. Similarly, Van der Geest, Bijleveld, and Blokland (2011) found that the strength of the association between employment and desistance depends upon employment quality (measured here as regular work with potential long-term prospects as opposed to temporary or seasonal work). Likewise, Shover (1996: 127) stated that ‘not all types of employment are equally likely to moderate offenders’ criminal involvement’. Those that will provide a ‘decent income, enable the individual to exercise intelligence and creativity, and allow for some autonomy in structuring the day’s activities’.

This requirement for work to be ‘high-quality’ may help explain the rather inconsistent findings in the employment and desistance research detailed in the previous section. Indeed, Weaver (2018: 3) expressed that it is ‘increasingly acknowledged that employment does not produce or trigger desistance; rather it is the meaning and outcomes of either the nature and/or quality of the work... that can explain the relationship’. The question that naturally arises therefore is how to determine what ‘quality’ work is? The studies detailed above mention various aspects of employment – the skill and status of the work, job security, potential for career advancement, the level of remuneration and the freedom to be creative and exercise autonomy when working. Research within criminology regarding the type of employment required for desistance is scarce, and therefore it is necessary to seek answers from other disciplines in order to address this lacuna. In the field of organisational psychology, which explores human behaviour in the workplace, there is a substantial body of literature detailing the value of ‘meaningful work’. This research has been conducted with

non-offenders. It describes how experiencing meaningfulness at work is important for work engagement, individual performance and personal fulfilment (Humphrey, Nahrgang and Morgeson 2007; Bunderson and Thompson, 2009; Christian, Garza and Slaughter 2011).

As described in chapter 1, the definition of meaningfulness used in this thesis is that purported by King, Heintzelman and Ward (2016: 212), who define meaningfulness as the feeling that our life has 'purpose, significance, and coherence'. Therefore, experiencing meaningfulness can essentially help answer a broader existential question about the purpose of one's existence, i.e. it helps us make sense of 'why am I here?' (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003). Employment can engender meaning in two ways. An individual can find 'psychological meaningfulness in work' to the extent that work aligns with and fulfils the individual's ideas of what is valuable in life. Additionally, an individual can also find 'meaning making through work' where the work itself makes a broader contribution in finding meaning in life (Steger, Dik and Duffy, 2012).

2.3.1. A typology of organisational practices that generate meaningfulness

What characterises the type of work that can provide meaning? The research on meaningful employment details an array of employment practices which employees have stated make work meaningful. In this section, I create a typology of these organisational practices. I generated these categories, and I acknowledge that some may overlap and they may not encompass all the research into meaningful employment. Nevertheless, I have aimed to categorise the main findings of the research in this area.

Provides work which 'does good'

Scholars consistently report that an individual can find meaning in their work role if it involves making a positive contribution towards a greater good. For example, Singer (1995) argues that to find meaning, the cause for which individuals work must be a transcendent one: it extends beyond the boundaries of self and 'makes the world a better place to live in'. Moreover Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) in their workshops with adults from a variety of occupational backgrounds, found that 'making a difference' and 'meeting the needs of humanity' made work meaningful. Furthermore, Bailey and Madden (2015) conducted interviews with academics, refuse collectors and stonemasons. They found that all three groups, from very different professions, described their work as feeling meaningful because of its significance and wider contribution in doing something 'good' for the public and the environment. They also pronounced their work as meaningful because it would have value for future generations. Interestingly and contrary perhaps to expectations, even the refuse collectors felt their work was meaningful, because of its environmental conservation efforts.

They disregarded the commonly applied label in society that it was ‘dirty work’ and took pride in their contribution.

The proposition that ‘doing good’ at work can engender experiences of meaningfulness was further verified by Allan, Duffy and Collison (2017). They found that their participants (a mixture of students and professionals) consistently designated work that helped others as meaningful. In one particular experiment – which involved a typing task that generated money for a charity – the task itself was completely devoid of meaning, however participants still rated it as meaningful. This demonstrates that individuals can gain personal meaning from even the most mundane work task if they can connect it to a larger, more significant, cause. Furthermore, a series of studies revealed that work is more meaningful if employees have contact with the beneficiaries of their work (Grant et al., 2007; Grant and Hoffman, 2011a; 2011b). Indeed, evidence shows that a mere story, photograph or mention of a beneficiary is sufficient to create meaningfulness (Grant, 2008). Thus, experiencing the impact of work on others has consistent positive effects. In contrast, work for which employees see no evident purpose and which has no effect on others has been widely deemed to be meaningless work (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009; Bailey and Madden, 2015).

Therefore, work with transcendent benefits elucidates feelings of meaningfulness because it allows the individual to feel that they serve a wider purpose in society. Connecting to something greater than one’s self is a key way to create a sense of significance in one’s life and a greater understanding of why we are here. The literature on ‘doing good’ and meaningfulness also mentions that working for a company whose occupational mission is for the greater good may invoke feelings of meaningfulness among workers due to the positive public perceptions of the work they do (Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski, 2010). Perceiving that others around you believe you are making valuable societal contributions enhances feelings of meaningfulness.

Provides opportunities for ‘learning’

The literature on meaningful work suggests that opportunities for learning and skill development in employment can evoke feelings of meaningfulness. For example Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) found that work is experienced as meaningful if it results in personal growth through ongoing learning; there is inherent meaning in successfully mastering new skills. Likewise, other studies have acknowledged the importance of ‘personal growth’ to experiences of meaningful work (Steger, Dik and Duffy, 2012; Allan, Autin and Duffy, 2016). Moreover, Bowie (1998), when outlining the characteristics of

meaningful work, identifies work that enables the worker to develop their ‘rational capacities’.

Developing our abilities boosts self-esteem and promotes feelings of worthiness, which naturally enhances the feeling that our life - and ourselves in it - has significance and meaning (Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski, 2010). Moreover, if the acquisition of knowledge is something that an individual specifically values, then undertaking work that can fulfil this will necessarily invoke feelings of meaningfulness. This is because meaningful employment involves not only work that ‘makes meaning’ itself, but also work that aligns with already held values (Steger, Dik and Duffy, 2012). It means that our work role fits our ideals for what is important in life, which gives that life a greater sense of coherence. Indeed, Park and Choi (2016) confirmed this. They found that employees who learn new skills at work perceive this as particularly meaningful if they already recognise learning as valuable.

Provides opportunities for ‘personal achievement’

Occupational psychologists have also found that opportunities for personal achievement at work can be meaningful. Although related, this is to be distinguished with the organisational practices specified in the two preceding sections. ‘Personal achievement’ at work does not necessarily involve ‘doing good’ for others, rather it is an individual sense of achievement. Moreover, personal achievements do not have to involve learning new skills. Rather such an organisational practice is largely concerned with job performance and task accomplishment. For example, in Bailey and Madden’s (2015) study, a common articulation from participants across the occupational groups was that a sense of meaningfulness arose when standing back to admire the completion of a piece of work. Similarly, Pratt and Ashforth (2003) stated that work is more meaningful when employees are able to complete whole and identifiable pieces of work. Such positive feelings of achievement at work, as with learning new skills in the previous section, enhances one’s sense of worthiness and significance which can make one’s life feel more meaningful. Indeed, Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski (2010: 110) affirmed that meaningfulness in work arises from the accomplishment of tasks because it provides individuals with a sense of self-efficacy.

Furthermore, personal achievement at work can affect not only how we feel about ourselves, but also how others view us. As May, Gilson and Harter (2004) explain, experiences of meaning can be attained through feeling that others view your work performance positively, as this reaffirms to an individual that they can successfully do their job and have a recognised purpose in their lives. Therefore, we are more likely to experience feelings of meaningfulness at work if we perceive that others acknowledge and respect our success at work.

Provides 'interesting' work tasks

Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski (2010), in their review of the literature on meaningful employment, found that employees who characterised their work as meaningful related this to perceptions of enjoyment or interest in work. However, this may not mean that, in order for employment to be meaningful, all work tasks must be interesting. Instead, the literature suggests that what is most important is that work tasks are not repetitive. Indeed, research consistently demonstrates that individuals find work that involves both task and skill variety meaningful (Fried and Ferris, 1987; Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Steger, Dik and Duffy, 2012; Veltman, 2015; Allan, Duffy and Collison, 2017).

It has not been fully explained why employment that is interesting invokes feelings of meaningfulness. Silvia (2006) defines 'interest' as a positive emotion following cognitive appraisal. Research demonstrates that experiences of positive emotions and mood can be meaningful. For example, King et al. (2006) found that people who say they feel happiness or enjoyment are more likely to rate their lives as meaningful. Indeed it has been discovered in several studies that an individual can be lacking in many of the things that are considered to make life meaningful, and yet still rate their lives as very meaningful if they often experience positive mood (Hicks and King, 2008; Hicks, Schengel and King, 2010, Ward and King, 2016). Unfortunately, why this might be the case has also yet to be explored. Perhaps it is because we will gradually begin to value and define as significant that which produces positive emotions. This would mean, in relation to 'interesting' employment, the more we engage in such work and experience the associated positive mood, the more we would consider such a work role to be inherently important to our overarching life purposes. The increasing coherence between values and work behaviours should generate feelings of meaningfulness (Steger, Dik and Duffy, 2012). This would explain why employment that involves mundane, repetitive tasks might inhibit experiences of meaning. Because such work tends to produce negative emotions such as boredom and frustration it is very difficult to value such tasks and construe them as part of our life purposes.

Allows for 'self-determination' when working

Carter and Lunsford (2005) argue that for employment to be meaningful it should allow for the use of 'self-determination' skills, such as self-management, decision-making, problem-solving, initiative and independence. There is evidence to support this proposition in the literature. In Bailey and Madden's (2015) study, all three occupational groups reported that a sense of control over the way they spent their working day was associated with the experience of meaningfulness. Similarly, it has been widely reported that employees will classify jobs which allow for higher levels of autonomy as more meaningful (Fried and Ferris, 1987; Bowie, 1998; Shover, 1996; Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski, 2010; Allan,

Duffy and Collisson, 2017). Further supporting this, Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) found that meaningless work typically is associated with working conditions where there is excessive control over the actions of employees.

Why might ‘self-determination’ make work meaningful? Deci et al. (1989: 580) explain that self-determined employees experience ‘a sense of choice in initiating and regulating their actions’. Therefore self-determination can be associated with feelings of meaningfulness because it involves being free to act in accordance with our valued purposes. Having more autonomy in what one does at work necessarily means that individuals can actively construct their work in a way that it provides meaning for them. This is known as ‘job crafting’ (discussed in more detail in section 2.3.2). Moreover, the feeling of self-determination itself may be meaningful. In the psychological field, the established ‘self-determination’ theory purports that human beings are naturally predisposed to seek autonomy in their lives (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Thus, most individuals will experience work that satisfies this desire for self-determination as meaningful because this is a significant value in their lives, which they seek to fulfil (Steger, Dik and Duffy, 2012).

Promotes ‘social bonds’

Organisational psychology literature establishes that employees often consider work that generates close social bonds between co-workers meaningful. Indeed, several research studies demonstrate that individuals who have rewarding interpersonal interactions and identify with their co-workers perceive their employment to be more meaningful (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Bechky, 2003; May, Gilson and Harter, 2004; Grant, Dutton and Rosso, 2008). In particular, Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) found that ‘unity with others’ makes work meaningful, which occurs when individuals feel they belong and share values with other co-workers. Employment that involves ‘team-working’ can promote this, as the act of doing things together can create bonds and provide an experience of common purpose. Similarly, Pratt and Ashforth (2003) theorise that employees who work for organisations that create close-knit, family-like dynamics among members of the workforce will find meaning in their work. Such dynamics emphasise a sense of caring and ‘oneness’ among employees, hence eliciting feelings of interpersonal connection.

Why should feeling close to your co-workers evoke feelings of meaningfulness? The answer may lie in the field of social psychology, where scholars explain that a fundamental human need is to experience ‘relatedness’ (Ryan and Deci, 2002). Deci et al. (1991: 327) define relatedness as the development of secure and satisfying connections with others in one’s social surroundings; it allows one to feel that they belong in their social milieu. As explained earlier, employment is meaningful if it aligns with the individual’s overarching

values (Steger, Dik and Duffy, 2012). Therefore, employment that fulfils this desire for relatedness will be meaningful for most.

The literature gives another explanation as to why close bonds with co-workers might make work meaningful. Feeling sufficiently comfortable in the company of co-workers to be one's 'true self' can elucidate feelings of meaningfulness. For example, Kahn (2007) theorised that close interpersonal relationships with co-workers may have a positive impact on perceptions of meaningfulness if they allow for a degree of 'psychological safety'. This means that employees feel safe to express their valued identities and act according to their own valued purposes while at work. Similarly, May, Gilson and Harter (2004) stated that trusting bonds between co-workers can mitigate against feelings of self-consciousness, allowing individuals to feel they can safely display their true selves at work without fear of negative consequences. The freer one feels to act in alignment with their values and desires, the greater the experienced meaningfulness.

Provides 'job security' and an 'adequate income'

Hitherto, I have discussed sources of meaningfulness that are 'intrinsic' to the work role. In contrast, Codell et al. (2011) defines meaningful employment as 'work that is competitively obtained, pays above minimum wage, and is not time-limited'. Yet, the meaningful employment scholarship is largely hesitant about the role of extrinsic sources of meaningfulness in work (see for example Bunderson and Thompson, 2009). The consensus appears to be that the absence of adequate pay and job security can restrict the ability of employees to find meaning in their work. However, pay and job stability are not sources of meaning in themselves.

Indeed, Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski (2010) and Baumeister (1991) state that poverty in work can constrain its meaning; only those who have their needs met through the attainment of an adequate income can afford the luxury of seeking further self-fulfilment in work. Similarly, studies such as Bowie (1998), Steger, Dik and Duffy (2012), Veltman (2015) and Wrzesniewski (2003) confirmed that fair remuneration for work done is a condition for experiencing meaning in work. As explained by Veltman (2015) poorly paid work necessarily puts more deprivations upon workers, it is more likely to lead to frustrations and feelings of unfairness and helplessness. Workers in better financial positions experience a greater degree of fulfilment of their wants and correspondingly enjoy greater feelings of satisfaction, adequacy, and self-regard. These feelings are far more likely to support discovery of meaning in employment. A lack of stability in employment also appears to be a work condition that can deprive workers of the opportunity to pursue

meaningful work. For example, Ayers et al. (2008) and Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) state that experiences of meaning are limited by objective concerns such as security and stability of work. Moreover, Sennett (1998) argues that without job security workers cannot place themselves in a continuous narrative, leading to a loss of coherence – and therefore a loss of meaning - in one's working life.

2.3.2. The subjectivity of meaningfulness

Thus, the typology I have created from the meaningful employment literature is summarised in table 2.2:

Table 2.2 Typology of meaningful employment

Organisational practice	Source(s) of meaning
Provides work which 'does good'	Connection to wider purpose in society Positive reactions from others
Provides opportunities for 'learning'	Boosts feelings of worthiness and self-efficacy May reverberate with ultimate concerns
Provides opportunities for 'personal achievement'	Boosts feelings of worthiness and self-efficacy Positive reactions from others
Provides 'interesting' work tasks	Experience of positive emotion
Allows for 'self-determination' when working	Freedom to find meaning in work Satisfies innate desire for autonomy
Promotes 'social bonds'	Fulfils need for relatedness
Provides 'job security' and an 'adequate income'	Its absence can inhibit feelings of meaningfulness

Overall, when assessed against the typology, the GL employment scheme certainly has potential to be classified as 'meaningful employment'. However, this does not mean that the young participants in this study will automatically find working at the GL meaningful, because the literature on meaningful employment informs us that experiences of meaningfulness are necessarily subjective. As described by King, Heintzelman, and Ward (2016), our lives are not simply meaningful or not, they are *experienced* as meaningful.

Isaken (2000) found that even workers in mundane, highly repetitive jobs can find their work meaningful. Equally, a person employed in work exhibiting all the characteristics associated with experienced meaningfulness may still fail to find meaning in their work (Beadle, 2016). It is the *individual* participating in the work who defines it as meaningful.

In particular, whether an individual finds their work to be meaningful or not may depend upon their 'work orientation'. Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski (2010) state that we have inherent 'work orientations' and that these shape the meaning we attach to work. Employees can perceive work as a 'means to an end', where it is merely a means of gaining sufficient financial resources to enjoy their time out of work. Alternatively workers can have a 'career' orientated perception of employment where they believe the value of work is to obtain the status, prestige and other rewards that arise from advancement through an occupational structure. Finally, those who have a 'calling' work orientation focus on the inherent fulfilment that working brings. Similarly, there are the concepts of 'transactional' and 'transformational' engagement in work (Bass, 1985; 1999). Those who engage in employment transactionally do what is expected of them to receive their pay. Those who engage in employment transformationally find an innate value in their work beyond what they get in return and therefore may go over and above what is necessary for their job role (Breevaart et al., 2014). It has not been fully established in the literature whether only those who engage in employment transformationally or have a 'calling' work orientation can experience meaning from their work. However, Allan, Autin and Duffy (2016) and De Crom and Rothman (2018) reported that employees who were extrinsically motivated were less likely to experience their work as meaningful.

Meaningful employment research also reveals that some individuals exercise agency, and shape their work to maximise its meaning-enhancing properties. Such 'job crafting' can involve either physically or cognitively redefining the task and relational boundaries of the work (Wrzesniewski, 2003). Therefore, although the earlier discussion focuses on organisational practices that typically confer meaningfulness, it is important to remember that individuals are not passive respondents. Even when confronted with *prima facie* meaningless employment, we have the freedom to craft our work to either create meaning in itself or to reflect our purposes and values in life, which will in turn advance feelings of meaningfulness (Steger, Dik and Duffy, 2012).

Another reason why young people may not necessarily experience their work with the GL as meaningful - despite it meeting much of the criteria for meaningful employment displayed in table 2.2 - is because existing research focuses upon a somewhat unrepresentative sample of the workforce. The meaningful employment literature has been

dubbed by scholars as ‘painfully elitist’ (Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski, 2010) because it has predominantly focused upon the experiences of middle-class professionals. Indeed, several studies, such as Allan, Autin and Duffy (2016) and Lips-Wierma and Morris (2009) admit that white and highly educated persons are over-represented in their samples. Similarly Hirschi (2012), despite investigating meaningful employment with employees in ‘diverse occupations’, specified that the majority of participants had attained at least a Master’s degree. Other examples of participants within the literature include university professionals (Steger, Dik and Duffy, 2012), employees at an insurance firm (May, Gilson and Harter, 2004), US soldiers on peace-keeping missions (Britt et al., 2001) and a group of degree-educated but very low paid zoo-keepers (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009). Even in studies where lower-status and less-skilled occupations are examined, for example Bailey and Madden’s (2015) study which included refuse collectors, these have not included younger people with limited experiences of employment, such as the participants in this study. Indeed, few studies have explored meaningful employment with young people. An exception perhaps is Allan, Duffy and Collison (2017) who included a sample of undergraduate students in their study. However, students are likely to be slightly older and of a different social-economic background than the young people that are the focus of this research project.

Therefore, whilst the GL might *prima facie* display the organisational practices necessary for meaningful employment, this is informed by research that has not included the particular social group employed by the GL. Because of this, such an assessment may be flawed. The young people in this study are at a considerable distance from the labour market, due to their lack of qualifications, limited employment history and criminal record. As a result, they may have quite different ideas about what constitutes meaningful work. Some of the organisational practices specified earlier may not be applicable to young people, and there may be other organisational practices not mentioned that might generate feelings of meaningfulness for this group. Consequently, this project explores with participants what organisational practices they consider meaningful (**research aim 1**). Thus, whilst aiming to contribute to the knowledge of what can support desistance in young offenders, this project may also be a valuable addition to the research on meaningful employment, by attempting to investigate this with a different social group to those surveyed previously. I will then evaluate the extent to which the GL scheme meets young people’s criteria for meaningful work (**research aim 2**).

2.4. Conclusion

The research examining whether engaging in employment can result in desistance demonstrates inconclusive results. Scholars therefore question whether perhaps only a

certain ‘type’ of employment might lead to desistance. Unfortunately, research is scarce beyond this point and consequently I have suggested in this chapter that it might be useful to consult literature from other fields, in particular surrounding the concept of ‘meaningful’ employment. An overview of the main findings in this area demonstrates that there are several organisational practices employees routinely describe creating meaning in their work. These are presented in a typology in this chapter. Nonetheless, because experiences of meaningfulness are subjective, it is necessary in this project to investigate what elements of working my participants consider meaningful. This is also required because the existing research on meaningful employment has not represented the specific niche of the population from which these young people emanate. The subsequent chapter considers *how* participation in meaningful employment might aid desistance.

3. How meaningful employment might aid desistance: considering ‘identity reconstruction’

3.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I established that experiencing meaningfulness involves the feeling that our lives have purpose, coherence and significance. Meaningful employment therefore involves work that either creates these feelings or aligns with our pre-existing ideas of what is important in life. This chapter introduces the idea that engaging in meaningful employment might aid desistance because of how it influences the individual’s identity. Organisational psychologists explain that experiencing meaning can affect our identity. Criminologists purport that a change in identity can be crucial to sustain desistance. This chapter explores the literature from these two different fields, and suggests that participation in meaningful employment might aid pro-social identity reconstruction and therefore desistance. However, research has yet to investigate the validity of this proposition, and consequently this forms the purpose of this thesis.

3.2. The intersections of meaning and identity

Occupational psychologists Pratt and Ashforth (2003) describe how the concept of meaning is associated with identity. They purport that experiencing meaning helps us answer the question ‘why am I here?’, but naturally the first step to understanding ‘why am I here?’ is to first comprehend ‘who am I?’. Thus, how one makes sense of the world is inexorably tied to one’s identity; the individual’s identity has a mediating role in determining what is meaningful. Pratt and Ashforth explain that if our employment role is compatible with whom we see ourselves as, then experiences of meaning will follow; work will become a form of self-expression. This has also been confirmed by May, Gilson and Harter (2004) who assert that meaningfulness in work can arise from ‘work role fit’: doing work that aligns with an individual’s self-concept. Similarly, Beadle (2016) states that meaningfulness arises where there is such a close relationship between work actions and one’s identity to the point where work is a crucial part of a persons’ whole life narrative.

However, Pratt and Ashforth (2003: 326) further state that there is an identity paradox. Whilst our identity may have an impact upon whether we consider work meaningful, finding meaning in our work can also have an effect upon our identity. Meaningful work can influence our identity because the sense of purpose, significance or coherence that arises from experiencing meaningfulness necessarily effects how we see ourselves. Understanding ‘why am I here?’ it would seem also has a reciprocal impact upon the answer to ‘who am I?’. Philosopher Unamuno (1913) broadly describes how finding meaning is key to the development of identity. He states that humans invariably strive to

understand the ‘wherefore’ or ultimate purpose of their lives. Without a convincing ‘meaning’ to our existence, the self is reduced to a transient phenomenon. Indeed, our particular role in society will undoubtedly influence who we think we are. As Ashforth and Schinoff (2016) express, meaningful occupations facilitate identity construction by providing ‘prototypical narratives’ tied to the organisation’s identity and one’s role within it. Similarly, Gini (2000) and Ashforth (2001) state that having a meaningful work role helps create one’s self-conceptions. Likewise, Harding (2019) confirms that meaningful work allows the self to ‘flourish’. Therefore, experiencing meaningful work has potential to shape our identity.

Overall, this literature suggests that experiencing meaning is very important to identity, and vice versa. Referring to criminological literature, a concept that is central amongst the most recent conjecture surrounding desistance is that of ‘identity reconstruction’. Many scholars purport that identity change is vital in stopping offending (Maruna, 2001; Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002; Healy and O'Donnell, 2008; Farrall et al., 2011; Harris, 2011; King, 2012; Opsal, 2012; King, 2013; F-Dufour and Brassard, 2014; Healy, 2014; Rocque, Posick and Paternoster, 2014; Bachman et al., 2016; Paternoster et al., 2016). Thus, I wish to explore in this project whether it is possible that there is a connection between engaging in meaningful employment, identity reconstruction and desistance.

3.3. A key theory of desistance: reconfiguration of identity

This section shall outline the criminological literature surrounding identity and desistance. In particular, it will detail the key assertions of identity reconstruction theorists, explore the drivers of identity change and consider the research investigating identity and desistance among young populations.

3.3.1. The tenets of the theory

Although Shover (1983) found that desisters made a realisation that their youthful criminal selves and behaviour were of limited value for the future and so made efforts to ‘cast off’ their former identity, it was Maruna’s (2001) work that brought ‘identity reconstruction’ to the attention of desistance theorists. Maruna was predominantly interested in offenders’ life stories or narratives. Psychologists purport that, as we move through life, we begin to internalise a ‘self-narrative’ (Stevens, 2012). This unifies the disparate events that have occurred over the duration of one’s life to produce a coherent story. Forming these life narratives helps us to consolidate our sense of ‘self’. Thus, as described in chapter 1, the narrative can be understood as more than a retrospective record of life events; it aids the formation of an individual’s identity. As Dingfelder (2011:42) states, ‘we create ourselves

out of the stories we tell about our lives'. Research on the self then suggests that how one views oneself is a primary factor in attitudes and behaviour; 'identity' provides a direction for, and will be consistent with, our actions (Matsueda, 1992; Reynolds and Ceranic, 2007). As Burke and Reitzes (1991) explain, individuals make commitments to their identity; it gives us self-imposed 'inner rules' that we feel compelled to abide and modify our behaviour by.

Thus, understanding how a person explains their life story should give us clues as to why they act a certain way. Based on this, Maruna's (2001) Liverpool Desistance Study carried out a systematic comparison of the self-narratives of desisters and persisters. To ensure the two groups were distinct, he chose those individuals at the far ends of the desister/persister scale. Only those who reported at least one-year of non-offending and described themselves as 'going straight' were included as desisters, whereas persisters were those who openly admitted that they were carrying on with criminal pursuits. The assumption was that if the composition of narratives distinguished one group from the other, then this might be implicated in the process of desistance. Maruna conducted 'life story' interviews with both sets of participants and compared the findings. He discovered that persisters and desisters formed different types of self-stories. Desisters form 'redemption narratives' which serve to reconstruct negative past behaviours in such a way as to make their present good behaviour seem like almost an inevitable outcome. They describe themselves as always being a good person; however, they were a victim of bleak chances in life that made them get involved in crime. In spite of this, a person or organisation believed in them, which allowed their real 'good' self to emerge again. Desisters described then feeling that they could take control of their lives and wished to give something back to society, potentially by helping others; they wanted to make something good out of the difficulties they had lived through. Thus by reconfiguring their past, desisters can conceptualise a 'pro-social' identity for themselves (Maruna, 2001:7). This supports desistance because continued involvement in criminal activity would naturally be incongruent with the new identity they have made a commitment to.

Conversely, persisters were found to employ 'condemnation scripts' where they felt that it would be impossible for them to escape a life of deviance. They saw themselves as victims of forces outside their control – such as drug dependency, poverty, a lack of education or societal prejudice. They perceived that because of these circumstances, their life scripts were written for them a long time ago – they had no real hope for change. Maruna found that the narratives of persisters were five times more likely to be lacking a language of agency. With such an understanding of their lives, it is unsurprising that these individuals would continue to engage in criminal offending. Thus, Maruna's research led to

the understanding that certain narratives may be criminogenic, whilst others might promote desistance.

A wealth of studies have built upon the findings of Maruna (2001), to further explore this notion of 'identity reconstruction'. Firstly there have been studies seeking to greater clarify how exactly the desister manages to account for his past offences when he is now wanting to be seen as a 'good' person. Maruna, Wilson and Curran (2006) described the 'conversion narrative', which integrated disparate and shameful life events, such as criminality, into a coherent whole and transformed them into being seen as empowering, rather than negative events. They could then be used as a way to provide vision and hope for the future. Thus, as later confirmed by Maruna and Roy (2007), desisters do not deny or 'knife-off' their criminal past, so that they can justify and defend their current 'good' identity, rather they 'reconstruct' it. As described by Bachman et al. (2016: 166) it is a 'wilful cognitive distortion'.

Moreover, it has been clarified in subsequent literature that identity formation involves more than the development of a self-narrative that unifies and makes coherent the past events of one's life; identity also consists of future goals - the 'ideal self' that one is working towards becoming at the moment. A significant contribution to understanding the importance of goals in identity and desistance was by Vaughan (2007) who purported that the process of identity reconstruction can only be understood by considering the individual's 'ultimate concerns'. He explained that these are what an individual desires most in the world at that point in time. If these ultimate concerns shift then narratives must be re-configured to fit these new goals. A future self is visualised that has achieved these goals – which gives the individual something to strive and direct their actions towards (Presser, 2010; Hunter and Farrall, 2018). This draws upon the psychological field, where the 'Possible Selves Theory' (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Oyserman and Markus, 1990) posits that individuals act in ways that will aid the achievement of their desired possible self and avoid acting in ways that will prevent this achievement. For example, in Maruna's (2001) study he found that desisters tended to desire the achievement of 'generative' goals. The concept of 'generativity' was first introduced by Erikson (1968) and has been defined as 'the ability to transcend the immediate self-related interests of the person in favour of a view of generations to come' (Monte, 1995: 291). In Maruna's study, he found that generative goals took the form of a desire to give something back to society, for example by training to be a mentor to other offenders. This envisioned future self necessarily required a re-conceptualisation of their criminal past and directed a change in their criminal behaviours.

However, in a valuable theorisation by Paternoster and Bushway (2009), it was suggested that it is not only the idealisation of a possible self that motivates individuals to change their behaviours, but also the perception of a ‘feared self’: the person they might become if they fail to change. These imaginings of the two possible selves provide a set of instructions directing what one can do to both achieve the positive future self and avoid the negative possible self. Thus, this added an interesting dimension to existing perspectives. This theory has been supported in a quantitative research study by Bachman et al. (2016). These scholars found that 80% of those who had desisted from crime appeared to have made a cognitive identity transformation and this transformation was most often coupled with a concurrent perception of someone they did not want to become, a feared self.

Moreover Bachman et al.’s was not the only quantitative study to confirm the relevance of an identity transformation to desistance. It was found in studies by Rocque, Posick and Paternoster (2014) and Na, Paternoster, and Bachman (2015) that changes in identity were statistically related to criminal behaviour and that identity remained a significant and robust predictor of crime over time. The confirmation of the existence of ‘identity reconstruction’ as an influencing factor in the desistance process in quantitative studies is important as it shows that this concept is not a mere interpretation fallacy of qualitative researchers when reading into the narratives of former offenders. It demonstrates that this is a valid and worthwhile concept to study.

I will conclude this section by summarising what can be understood regarding identity reconstruction from the literature examined so far. Maruna (2001) purports that desisters create ‘redemption narratives’ that they use to re-configure to a pro-social identity. An important requirement for desisters to achieve this identity transformation is that they redefine their past negative behaviours – particularly their involvement in crime – to make these coherent with their new positive and law-abiding self (Maruna, Wilson and Curran, 2006; Maruna and Roy, 2007; Harris, 2011). Reconstruction of identity also requires a shift in goals: to achieve an imagined positive self (Healy and Donnell, 2008) and to avoid an imagined feared self (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). Together these imagined future selves provide both motivation and guidance on how to maintain the desister’s emerging pro-social identity. Whilst the above is relatively coherent, and should give the reader an understanding of the current thinking on identity within the field of desistance, the following sections will expand upon this to allow greater comprehension of how identity reconstruction is understood in this study.

3.3.2. The drivers of identity change: cognitive or external factors?

The literature establishes that desisters construct their identity differently from persisters and this can aid an explanation of why they turn away from offending. However, it is less clear what drives such a change in identity in the first place. It is implied in Maruna's theory that agency is crucial to identity reformation, as he purports that desisters feel they can take control over their futures and so 'actively work' to change who they are, whereas persisters feel like they are victims of forces outside of their control, and so they cannot conceive of an alternative identity for themselves. Exercising 'agency' has been defined by Axford (2010: 742) as 'having the capacity to undertake the preferred action'. Therefore, if one feels that they have agency they will feel that they have 'a sense of command over their destiny' (Matza, 1964: 28). Subsequent studies of identity and desistance have also emphasised that building a sense of agency is a key theme in identity negotiation (see King, 2013; Rocque, Posick and Paternoster, 2014; Healy, 2014; Munford and Sanders, 2015). A notable contribution was by Paternoster and Bushway (2009) in their 'identity theory of desistance' (ITD), where they state that what triggers a change in identity is the realisation on the part of the individual that their criminal offending is more costly than beneficial. They therefore purport that the ITD is fully aligned with rational choice theory, as the individual agentically acts to change their identity; it is a 'wilful, purposive act of self-improvement' (Paternoster et al., 2016: 1206).

However if identity change is directed by individual choice, i.e. the former offender makes a self-conscious cognitive effort to become a new person, why can desisters do this, whereas persisters cannot? Why do feelings of agency vary between individuals? It has been suggested that this might be because some personality types promote a greater sense of agency, for example Healy (2013) states that desisters possess superior cognitive skills, self-efficacy and have a greater sense of optimism. However, this would not explain why, according to the age-crime curve (see Delisi (2015) for an overview) almost all persisters eventually become desisters. How do they develop a sufficient level of agency to conceive of a different identity for themselves? I suggest that in attempting to understand what might lead an individual to feel that they have the agency necessary to form a desistance supporting identity it is helpful to look outside that individual – to external social factors.

If opportunities that might support a new identity are limited within an offender's immediate environment then this necessarily restricts feelings of agency and limits the pro-social identity they can envision (Rumgay, 2004; Munford and Sanders, 2015; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). Indeed, King (2012) stated that each individual's social context bounds their identity horizon; individuals envisage future selves but then evaluate these against what is possible given the context of their present. If there are no chances to fulfil an imagined

identity then it will lose all credibility. This was affirmed in Healy and O'Donnell's (2008) study, which examined the identity narratives of individuals who were at the outset of the desistance process, and found that there was an absence of agentic themes in their analysis. They suggested that agency would not be apparent until their successes in the non-criminal world increase (i.e. a change in external factors) as these would allow them to become more confident of their ability to change and would support the formation of a pro-social identity.

There is considerable support in the desistance literature for the premise that external factors can promote a shift in identity. For example, Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph (2002) conducted a qualitative analysis of interviews with over 250 male and female offenders in the US. They found that for desistance to occur an offender needs to be open to change. The individual must then perceive an available 'hook' for change: an opportunity that has potential to support the departure from a criminal lifestyle, for example employment or a pro-social partner. These new opportunities should allow two other factors to occur which are necessary for the sustenance of the desistance process: the visualisation of a replacement self and the development of a new perception of offending behaviour. This is because they allow the individual to see themselves in a law-abiding role and provide a blueprint upon which to craft a conventional replacement self. Thus, Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph's theory demonstrates how key external sources of change are to pro-social identity formation. Furthermore, Stevens (2012) in her evaluation of therapeutic community prisons, found that taking part in the purposeful activity provided in this special form of incarceration produced and reinforced the emergence of a new identity. The realisation by these offenders through participation in the activities that they had a stock of valuable and worthwhile skills, made them visualise that they could be 'someone more'. Moreover, Kewley et al. (2017) describe how joining a religious community can prompt a change in identity and therefore aid desistance.

Therefore, this thesis shall follow the presumption of one of the founders of social psychology, George Herbert Mead, who stated that our identity or 'self' is the result of a negotiation between individual agency and social structure (Mead, 1934).

3.3.3. Identity through the looking glass

This section continues the argument that the conceptualisation of one's identity is affected by factors external to the individual. There is a considerable body of literature that specifies that how one conceives of their identity may be influenced or even determined by how they feel others around them perceive their identity. The central premise of the symbolic interactionist paradigm is that we react not to objective reality but to a subjective interpretation of reality based on our interactions with others (Mead, 1934; Giordano et al.,

2007; Castree et al., 2013). An interactionist perspective on identity reconstruction would therefore hold that one's self-concept as either deviant or conforming will be informed by how we feel others perceive our identity through our social interactions. This is also affirmed in psychology literature, which states that one's identity consists of both a private self-image and a social identity that is bestowed upon the individual by others, where the latter greatly influences the former (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1956; Jenkins, 2004).

Moreover, according to the criminological 'labelling' theory, which derives from a symbolic interactionist perspective, an offender will have felt that their identity was a criminal one before they began the desistance process mainly because they had been labelled as such by others (see Lemert, 1951; Becker, 1963). As reported by this theory, if a person is treated as a deviant by others (such as family, friends, the criminal justice system etc.) they will internalise this label and act this way, making more criminal activity inevitable. Therefore, this perspective suggests that if an individual is attempting to desist and formulate a pro-social identity, a process of reverse labelling will need to occur. Desisters will need to feel that they see their inner change 'reflected back' to them in the eyes of others, as it is only with this positive affirmation by other people that they can successfully consolidate a pro-social identity and desist.

There is evidence to support these interactionist suppositions in desistance research. Maruna (2001) found that desisters describe needing to have someone trust and see the good in them before they could change; it solidified their self-concept as an 'ex-offender'. Furthermore, Maruna et al. (2004) argue that a process of 'delabelling' may be crucial for individuals to move from primary to secondary desistance, or from an initial crime free lull to a more permanent turn away from crime which involves a change in identity. They found evidence of a 'looking-glass self-concept' operating in their study. Another relevant finding by Le Bel et al. (2008) was that feelings of being stigmatised predicted reconviction. In particular, they ascertained that anxieties about social prejudice induced a sceptical appraisal of future prospects. Thus demonstrating how it is more difficult to envision a future pro-social 'self' if the offender feels no one around them would likely believe it.

More recently, Nugent and Schinkel (2016) devised the term 'relational desistance' to describe the recognition of identity change by others and distinguished between different levels of relational desistance, where the micro-level relates to people within the individual's immediate social setting e.g. family and close friends, the meso-level to their wider community and the macro-level to society as a whole. They raised the notion in this study that identity change requires more than recognition by a person's immediate social circle; it needs to be acknowledged by others in wider society. This has widespread support. Halsey

and Deegan (2015) found that a move to a legitimate identity ideally should be recognised beyond the family sphere for long-term desistance to occur. Likewise, Menon and Cheung (2018) report that community-based reintegration services must reduce the stigma of juveniles being offenders and re-shape their identity as members of society.

The preceding literature demonstrates that whilst identity development is subjectively constructed – it is always created within the mind of the individual – one's identity cannot be what the individual agentially chooses it to be. Identity is also informed and constrained by social factors, such as how other people interact with the individual. As Presser (2016) elucidates, a key truth about the self is that it is socially constrained; we do not choose the identities we wish. Thus, internal change is not sufficient for identity reconstruction – there needs to be corresponding changes in an individual's external circumstances. A successful desister needs to feel that those around them reaffirm their reconfigured identity, by treating them as if they are the changed person they see themselves as.

An inevitable question that arises from this is how one can communicate to others that they are trying to change who they are. In short, it must be through their behaviour. As explained by Paternoster and Bushway (2009) a person's actions are perceived as expressions of their identity, we are seen by others to behave in ways that are consistent with our self-concept. Bushway and Apel (2012) state that there needs to be ways for those offenders who are going to desist to show themselves. They draw upon 'signalling theory' (Spence, 1973) to argue that prison work programs that involve voluntary enrolment serve an important role in the desistance process, not because of their ability to affect the criminality of offenders, but rather because successful completion of these can be a way to 'signal' to future employers that a person will desist. Bushway and Apel express that the completion of these work programs will be far less costly to someone who is committed to a pro-social identity, and so this can indicate to others that an individual has both inner motivation and ability to change.

This issue is also acknowledged by Maruna (2011), who purports that a 'ritual of reintegration' could be used to communicate to the public that an offender has changed. Maruna suggests that successful reintegration rituals would allow the desister a chance to 'act out' the internal change they have undergone; he gives the example of productive work done in the community, as a way of demonstrating to the public that they are a 'changed person'. Maruna further argues that such rituals should operate as a 'status elevation ceremony' to formally announce the actor's shift in identity from deviant to pro-social. Members of the law-abiding community must also certify that the offender has changed.

This symbolic recognition by society of the change in the offender should allow them to have stronger belief in their own transformation, hence consolidating their identity reconstruction, and therefore aiding desistance.

Bushway and Apel's (2012) and Maruna's (2011) theorisations demonstrate how external factors, such as employment opportunities, are crucial in identity transformation and desistance. An internal change of identity is insufficient, there also needs to be an opportunity for the ex-offender to demonstrate this to others in order to have this mindset reaffirmed.

3.3.4. Identity and youth

There is a limitation to the literature reviewed above - most studies of identity and desistance have explored this topic with adults. The research that has considered identity and desistance with young people suggests that identity change may take a different form for these individuals. Although not a study of desistance, Munford and Sanders (2015) explored identity development through life-narrative interviews with 13-17 year old youth justice service users in New Zealand. They found that due to the severe social exclusion these young people faced, their identity horizons were limited. They struggled to form a coherent pro-social identity because many had no stability at home that could act as a foundation for the search for a new identity. It was also found by Munford and Sanders that these young people had little control over their environments - being both minors and service users meant that often they had to wait for others to act on their behalf - therefore they could not develop the sense of agency needed to feel that they could successfully embrace a new identity.

Nugent and Schinkel (2016) examined identity narratives in interviews with five young people in the UK aged 16-21 who had been involved in crime but were now desisting. Contrary to expectations, the young desisters' changed identity was not based on achieving a positive future self, but rather seeking to avoid old places and associates as a way of ensuring they no longer offended. Their new identity involved seeing themselves as a non-offender, however it did not go beyond this; they had not conceived of a future 'self' as part of conventional society, as they were unsure who they could be. The main cause of this was a lack of opportunities. External help was needed to provide a 'hook for change' that could allow for the conception of a credible pro-social identity - something more than merely existing.

What is apparent in the outline of these two studies is that young people's ability to conceive of a new identity is constrained by a lack of agency. Even if they managed to reconfigure past events in such a manner as to visualise themselves as a non-offender, the young participants appeared unable to draw successfully upon opportunities in the social

sphere to connect their non-offending identity to future goals. Hence, their ability to create a fully formed ‘pro-social’ identity with a role in conventional society was limited. This may be because adults have more ability to influence their lives than children. Indeed, this proposition would be supported by Haigh’s (2009) research, which found that younger offenders were more likely to require external sources to aid their change in offending, whereas adult offenders attributed such a change to their own decision.

Another study which suggested that findings may be different when considering the identities of younger offenders was by Healy and O’Donnell (2008). Similarly to Maruna (2001), they examined in interviews the self-narratives of a group of desisters. However, unlike Maruna, they found a lack of evidence of any generative future goals in these participants’ descriptions of their emerging desistance-supporting identities. Indeed the ideal self that desisters strove for was very humble; they were not trying to find higher fulfilment through giving back to society in some way, but rather were preoccupied with becoming ‘normal’. Their goals were simply to meet conventional roles in work and family life. The authors theorised that this might be because their sample was younger than that of Maruna’s: Healy and O’Donnell’s participants were aged between 18-35 years. Healy and O’Donnell stated that generative themes might be more likely in an older sample, citing Erik Erikson’s (1968) work on the generativity phase of psychosocial development, which occurs in late adulthood.

Hitherto, the studies outlined in this section utilise Maruna’s (2001) model for how a change in identity might aid desistance – they examined young people’s narratives for a shift from a deviant self-view to a more pro-social one. Massoglia and Uggen (2010) by contrast took a ‘maturational’ approach to identity change. They were interested in whether a youth had progressed to a mature self-view or ‘adult’ identity, rather than focusing on the antisocial content of the self-view. Massoglia and Uggen explain the reason that perceiving oneself to be an adult could aid desistance is because many forms of delinquency are widely recognized as age-inappropriate for adults, and therefore the continuation of such behaviours is inconsistent with an adult identity. Indeed, they found that desisters are 68% more likely to feel like adults than those who persist. Walters (2018) also advocate taking a maturational approach when investigating identity with young offenders. They argue that, unlike adult offenders, youths may not possess a robust criminal identity, because they have not been involved in offending long enough – and therefore Maruna’s model is inappropriate with this group.

Consequently, based on the research findings presented in this section, I suggest that identity reconstruction for young desisters may take a different form than for adults. In

particular, young people may feel that they possess less agency and need to rely more on external interventions - such as employment - to drive their identity change. Their narratives may also lack the generative themes found in adult desisters' self-stories. Moreover, their identity change may not involve a switch from a deviant to a pro-social identity, but rather a shift to a 'mature' identity. However, the research in this area is relatively sparse. As the participants of this study are between the ages of 16-18, my findings surrounding their identity development will necessarily add to this research.

3.3.5. Overall

'Identity reconstruction' as a theory of desistance is one of the most prominent in the field. This section has outlined this theory and the research that has been conducted around identity and desistance. The literature demonstrated that whilst identity change is necessarily a cognitive process, it is largely influenced by factors external to the individual. How we perceive that others view us is key to our identity. Furthermore, a change in our external circumstances can be the necessary 'hook for change' to support an emerging pro-social identity for desistance. Whilst there are endless 'external factors' that potentially could influence a change in identity, such as changes in housing situation, forming romantic attachments, exposure to religion, becoming a parent etc., in this thesis I examine how a particular factor: 'engaging in meaningful employment' can impact upon identity construction.

3.4. Hypothesis and research aims

Organisational psychology literature reveals that experiencing 'meaning' from our employment can affect our identity (section 3.2). Criminological literature describes how a shift in identity can aid desistance, and that identity change is influenced by external social factors (section 3.3). Therefore, bringing literature from the two fields together, I hypothesise that engaging in meaningful employment can aid desistance because of its impact upon offenders' identities. As explained earlier, one's identity consists of narratives creating a specific coherence of past events and that particular coherence is dictated by our present goals or purpose, or - as Vaughan (2007) terms it - our 'ultimate concerns'. If one experiences meaningful work, one attains a corresponding sense of purpose; it can give us a sense of why we are here (King, Heintzelman and Ward, 2016). The sense of purpose gained from work could therefore prompt a reconstruction of one's self-story to ensure its consistency with the new 'ultimate concerns'. Furthermore as the role one attains through working is generally considered by society to be a 'pro-social' one, if meaningful work did

inspire a change to self-narrative, this would necessarily incorporate this pro-social purpose, to create a pro-social identity. According to identity theorists, we act in accordance with our self-view (Matsueda, 1992; Reynolds and Ceranic, 2007). Consequently, I suggest that if one's identity refocuses around a pro-social purpose, the new self-story might dictate pro-social actions. Therefore, meaningful employment - because it provides a positive sense of purpose in one's life - might be the 'hook for change' that is needed to support an offender's identity reconstruction and accordingly their desistance.

However, can crime also produce a sense of meaningfulness? Committing crime involves many of the same criteria that I outlined earlier for meaningful employment. Criminal activities (naturally dependent upon the crime) too can involve personal achievement, a degree of learning, self-determination, relatedness and can pay well. Not only positive actions can be meaningful; as Michealson et al. (2014) explain, nefarious acts such as those committed by terrorists could be construed as meaningful endeavours. Furthermore, Fitzpatrick, McGuire and Dickson (2015) state that through criminal activity young people can achieve valued goals such as enhancing their reputation with peers and forming a sense of social identity. Consequently, there is little doubt that criminal activities can be meaningful. This sense of meaning may also have an impact upon an offender's identity, as self-stories adapt to encompass new purposes. The crucial difference therefore is that engagement in meaningful employment, as opposed to participation in meaningful crime, is a purpose that the majority of society value and so it is more likely that it will influence the construction of a pro-social identity rather than a deviant one.

Nonetheless, there has yet to be any research exploring the proposed connections between meaningful employment, identity reconstruction and desistance. Therefore, the research aims for this project are:

1. To establish young offenders' conceptions of meaningful employment
2. To investigate the extent to which the GL social enterprise fulfils young offenders' criteria for meaningful work
3. To assess the impact of engaging in meaningful employment upon young offenders' identities
4. To determine the impact of engaging in meaningful employment upon young offenders' desistance process

There are desistance theorists who emphasise that external events, such as gaining employment, operate upon desistance with little impetus from the individual concerned. Indeed, Laub and Sampson (2003: 278) argue that desistance usually occurs by 'default with little reflection or meaningful intention'. Thus, these theorists place weight entirely upon the

external factor in aiding desistance. Alternatively, there are those theorists who explain any links between factors such as employment and desistance as being essentially spurious; they are both consequences of the offender going through an internal maturation. It is this subjective change that gives the individual the ability to both stop offending and engage in these activities (Le Bel et al., 2008; Skardhamar and Savolainen, 2014; Rocque, 2015). Therefore, these theorists emphasise that it is the internal factor that is important in aiding desistance. This thesis seeks to embrace elements of both of the preceding perspectives in explaining desistance. Indeed, there has been a growing realisation within criminology that external and internal factors operate through a dynamic, interactive process as influencers of desistance (see also Farrall, 2002; Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002; Le Blanc, 2004; Bottoms et al. 2004; Vaughan, 2007; Copp et al., 2019). This thesis adds to this body of literature by investigating whether an external factor - partaking in meaningful employment - may aid youth desistance by supporting identity reconstruction (an internal factor).

3.5. Conclusion

Chapters 2 and 3 have explored an array of literature and ideas. Chapter 2 reviewed the employment and desistance literature and suggested that ‘meaningful employment’ – a concept originating from occupational psychology - might be the necessary ‘type’ of employment that could aid desistance. Chapter 3 introduced the notion that engaging in meaningful employment might influence desistance because of its impact upon offenders’ identities. This theory has been borne out of literature across different fields. Organisational psychologists explain that experiencing meaning in our employment can influence our identity. Criminologists have found that reconstruction of identity, as a theory of desistance, has considerable empirical support. This proposes that desisters need to establish a pro-social identity if they are to sustain their desistance. The research surrounding identity and desistance reveals that identity reconstruction involves not only a cognitive change, but also an alteration in external circumstances. Therefore, this thesis seeks to investigate whether an external factor - participating in ‘meaningful employment’ - can influence the construction of the necessary identity for desistance. The subsequent chapter outlines the methods used to carry out this investigation.

4. Methods

4.1. Introduction

This chapter details the research design of this project. In particular, it explores the rationale for utilising a case study of the GL social enterprise and outlines the key characteristics of the participants. Furthermore, in this chapter I specify how I collected and analysed data. I provide details of the three methods used to gather information in this study: participant observations, semi-structured interviews (with both GL employees and their supervisors) and document analysis of YOT records. I then describe how a combination of these methods was utilised to ascertain young people's conceptions of meaningful employment, investigate their identity development and evaluate their desistance. More than one method of data analysis was required to interpret this data. In this chapter, I also reflect on the potential ethical issues with, and limitations of, these methods. In particular, I consider how my positionality might have influenced the research process, being very differently situated from the participants I was attempting to understand. Moreover, I detail the challenges faced when trying to explore concepts such as identity and desistance with young people with a history of justice involvement.

4.2. Case study

To fulfil the research aims of this project, I used the GL social enterprise as a case study. As described by Neuman (2014), an advantage of case study research is that it helps us connect abstract ideas with the concrete reality of the case(s) we observe in detail. A concentrated investigation of the GL and its participants allowed me to explore how processes of identity change and discovery of meaning (and the proposed interaction between these) operated in a real-life context. I developed a richer, more comprehensive and - importantly - more realistic explanation of these concepts based on my study of the intricacies of social life at the GL. There are of course other 'cases' where young people with a history of criminal offending experience work (for example other private, state and third-sector funded work programmes). However, I chose to examine a single case because it allowed for a detailed exploration of the concepts that were the concern of this project. A research design involving several of such programmes would not have been able to ascertain such rich data.

I surveyed young people from three GL social enterprises operating in Northern England, from the cities of Landington, Telville and Wheatburgh. Despite operating in different locations, the fundamental 'GL model' was utilised in each scheme. Each GL programme was affiliated with the YOT for that locality. They all involved groups of

between two to five young people working together with a single supervisor for six months, thus providing high supervision and support. All the supervisors that participated in the study operated according to the same ethos. They did more than supervise young people working; instead, they aimed to make a difference in young people's lives. Furthermore, each GL scheme supplied similar outdoor work, and employees were paid the same wage (minimum wage). Therefore, I consider that a single case study - the GL - was used in this project, rather than three individual case studies.

4.3. Participants

The participants of this project included twenty-three young people who attended the GL. Twenty-two of the young people were male and one was female. All were aged from 16 to 18 upon commencing the GL. One young person was black, two young people were of mixed race, and all the others were white. Young people were under the jurisdiction of either the Telville, Landington or Wheatburgh YOT. In almost all instances, the participants were the entire cohort group; I made no selection process. In Telville cohort 2 however, two cohort members consistently did not attend the GL and therefore were not included in this project. See table 4.1 below for details of GL employees.

The YOT and supervisors select young employees of the GL, out of the larger population of young people who are or have been recently under the supervision of the YOT. Firstly, this involves selecting those of an appropriate age; the GL only recruits young people between the ages of 16-18. Secondly, this involves selecting those who have a certain criminal history. The GL has limited resources, and therefore cannot afford to spend these on those who have only committed few, minor offences. On the other hand, it cannot recruit those who will be too high a risk to others, and those who have upcoming Detention and Training Orders or are under particularly stringent supervision will necessarily not be able to be employed. Thirdly, supervisors report selecting those they believe will engage with the employment and work well together on the programme.

Those youths that are under the supervision of the YOT are not the full population of young offenders for that locality. There are of course, those young people that commit crime and do not get caught. Moreover, the youth justice system in the UK is increasingly aiming to divert as many young people as possible from entering the system, due to the dangers identified of criminalising young people (McAra and McVie, 2010). As a consequence of diverting low-level young offenders, those who remain in the youth justice system are reported to be the most difficult to rehabilitate. The 2016 *Review of the Youth Justice System in England and Wales* states that those youths left in the youth justice system

are the most troubled working-class boys. They arise from dysfunctional and chaotic families where drug and alcohol misuse, physical and emotional abuse and offending is common. They are also the most persistent offenders, whilst overall youth offending is down; reoffending has increased (Taylor, 2016). This is the population from which the GL youths are drawn. Indeed, this is reflected in some of the key characteristics of the young participants in this study. Twenty percent of my participants were or had been looked after children⁴, compared to only 0.65% of under-18s in England (Department for Education, 2019a). Seventy-three percent of young people had been excluded from school, compared to only 0.1% of all children enrolled in schools in England (Department for Education, 2019b). Where known, 92% percent of young participants lived with other offenders.

Referring to official records, all the young participants had committed multiple offences prior to engaging in the GL, the average was 12. The Youth Justice Board provides a grading-system for the seriousness of offences, from one (least serious) to eight (most serious). On average young people's offences prior to engaging in the GL were 3.18, indicating that in general they committed mid-serious offences. This is reflected in their Asset Scores; most were considered by the YOT to be medium-risk offenders. For more details, see table 4.1. The most common offences on young people's records were criminal damage, burglary, common assault, shoplifting and theft of a motor vehicle. However, there were also some very serious offences on young people's records, such as arson, robbery, assault resulting in grievous bodily harm, and Class A drug supply.

⁴ Only one young person was living in care during the period of my research

Table 4.1 Details of Green Light employees

GL group	Names of employees⁵	Number of offences committed pre-GL	Average Offence Seriousness pre-GL	Asset Risk Score
Landington Cohort 1	Julie	7	2.71	Medium
	Sam	12	2.25	Low
	Gary	33	3.79	High
	Tim	11	2.91	Medium
Landington Cohort 2	John	29	2.83	Medium
	Glenn	13	3.31	Medium
	Kevin	13	2.31	Medium
Landington Cohort 3	Kyle	11	2.63	Medium
	Dale	7	3.86	Medium
Telville Cohort 1	William	4	4	Medium
	Joseph	5	3.2	Low
	Darrell	10	3	Medium
Telville Cohort 2	Adam	2	3	Medium
	Rory	12	3.92	Medium
Telville Cohort 3	Ian	35	3.14	Medium
	Scott	12	2.5	Medium
	Alexander	2	3.5	Medium
	Dean	2	6	Medium
Wheatburgh Cohort 1	Max	12	2.83	Low
	Harry	12	3.25	Medium
	George	10	2.9	Low
	Stephen	11	2.91	High
	Jay	4	2.5	Low

The four supervisors who worked with the cohorts included in this project were also participants. They were male and between the ages of 30 to 50, see table 4.2 below for details of supervisors.

Table 4.2 Details of Green Light supervisors

GL Scheme	Names of supervisors⁶
Telville	Ross
	Paul
Landington	Greg
Wheatburgh	Fred

⁵ All names replaced with pseudonyms.

⁶ All names replaced with pseudonyms

The GL operates in several locations in the UK. This project drew participants from three branches of this social enterprise, which were selected due to their closer proximity to the researcher's locality. An implication of this was that the number of participants was small, as there were between two to five young people in each cohort, and a new cohort only ran every six months in each locality. Moreover, not all the GL sites were in operation for the duration of the data collection period, for example the Wheatburgh GL was only established in late 2017. To attain a larger number of participants within the time frame for this research project would have required extensive travel to the other GL locations, which would have been unfeasible. Furthermore, there are many benefits to using a small number of participants. It allowed me to build relationships with young people and follow their journey through the GL programme and beyond. As Crouch and McKenzie (2006: 483) detail, research that -

‘seeks to penetrate social life beyond appearance and manifest meanings... requires the researcher to be immersed in the research field, to establish continuing, fruitful relationships with respondents and through theoretical contemplation to address the research problem in depth’.

When considering concepts such as ‘identity’ and ‘meaning’, these take time to explore with an individual. A level of trust needs to be built in order for young people to share their experiences, opinions and feelings. Therefore, I chose to follow twenty-three young people only, to allow time to do this.

Crouch and McKenzie (2006) also state that for exploratory research, small samples are an advantage because they permit repeated contact with respondents and greater involvement of the researcher, which enhances validity and reliability. This research is exploratory as it examines what a different social group to that previously surveyed defines as meaningful employment and it investigates whether meaningful employment has an impact upon identity reconstruction and desistance. Spending more time with a small number of young people, rather than spending a less time with a larger – though potentially more representative - number of young people was of greater importance in this study, to attain sufficient understanding of these new areas of exploration.

4.4. Methods of data collection

This research followed a mainly qualitative design. Qualitative research tends to collect far richer data than a quantitative approach (Mathews and Ross, 2010), making it a necessary choice for this research as the key conceptual ideas - in particular that of ‘identity reconstruction’ and ‘meaningful employment’ - needed to be examined in an in-depth way in order to reach a comprehensive understanding. Furthermore, Bryman (2005) states that

phenomenological principles underlie the qualitative approach. Qualitative research is rooted in the notion that it is important to understand the culture and behaviour of humans from their point of view, as each individual's experiences of the world are shaped by their understandings of their social reality. In this research project, I was committed to comprehending my participants' perspectives, as I aimed to ascertain young people's subjective understanding of meaningful employment and understand how this influenced the way in which they constructed their identities. For both of these purposes, grasping the nature of these young people's social reality and their frames of meaning was very important. Collecting qualitative data also allowed me to include statements from young people in the findings. There is a great deal of research proclaiming the need to hear from offenders themselves about what aids their desistance (Laub and Sampson, 2003; France and Homel, 2007; MacDonald, 2007; Maruna, 2016).

I chose **semi-structured interviews** as one of the primary methods of data collection. The longitudinal design of the project allowed me to follow in interviews the young people's evolution as they progressed through the GL placement. I conducted interviews with young people on their first week at the GL, three months in, on their last week and six months after completion of their placement with the GL. The first interviews conducted with GL attendees (0 months) examined their lives prior to being involved in the scheme and their initial experiences at the GL. 3-month interviews considered young people's experiences of employment in detail, including their conceptions of meaningful work. In the 6-month interviews I asked participants to reflect on their past offending, their time working at the GL and their plans for the future. The final, 12-month interviews were primarily concerned with young people's activities since leaving the scheme. On average, 0-month interviews lasted 10 minutes, 3-month and 6-month interviews lasted 25 minutes and 12-month interviews lasted 15 minutes.

I made schedules in advance for these interviews, see these in Appendix B (0 months, 3 months, 6 months and 12 months). I carefully planned which questions needed to be asked to gain the information I needed and at what time. It was very important to delve into young people's pasts, and in particular to discuss their offending, gradually. I designed the interview questions so that they could explore my themes of interest, yet be sufficiently simple for young people to be able to answer. Whilst there was a structure to these interviews, there was still the freedom for the conversation to stray onto other relevant topics. The flexibility of the interview allowed for exploration of emerging and potentially unexpected themes as they unfolded (Charmaz, 2003).

All interviews apart from the 12-month interview I conducted face-to-face with participants. I initially intended to hold all 12-month interviews by phone. I expected there to be difficulties in re-gaining contact with young people after they had left the GL. Organising for them to meet me in person would have likely been time-consuming and unsuccessful. Furthermore, the interview schedule for the follow-up interview was brief, and therefore requesting that the young people meet me for a more detailed discussion was unnecessary. However, it transpired that only five participants could be contacted by phone. The young people in this study lived chaotic lives, and consequently most had - for various reasons - changed phone numbers in the six months since they had left the GL scheme. Therefore, I instead contacted these participants via social media, using a private messaging service. This was reasonably successful and led to contact with eight more participants. Table 4.3 provides details of the interviews conducted with each young person.

Table 4.3 Interviews with GL youths

GL group	Names of employees⁷	0 month interview	3 month interview	6 month interview	12 month interview
Landington Cohort 1	Julie	√	√	√	√
	Sam	√	√	√	√ (via social media)
	Gary	√	√	√	x
	Tim	√	√	x (dropped out)	x
Landington Cohort 2	John	√	√	√	√
	Glenn	√	√	√	√
	Kevin	√	√	√	√ (via social media)
Landington Cohort 3	Kyle	√	√	√	x
	Dale	√	√	√	x

⁷ All names replaced with pseudonyms.

Table 4.4 Interviews with GL youths (continued)

GL group	Names of employees⁸	0 month interview	3 month interview	6 month interview	12 month interview
Telville Cohort 1	William	√	√	√	√ (via social media)
	Joseph	√	√	√	√ (via social media)
	Darrell	√	√	√	√ (via social media)
Telville Cohort 2	Adam	√	√	x (dropped out)	x
	Rory	√	√	x (dropped out)	x
Telville Cohort 3	Ian	√	x (dropped out)	x (dropped out)	x
	Scott	√	√	√	√
	Alexander	√	√	√	√ (via social media)
	Dean	√	√	√	x
Wheatburgh Cohort 1	Max	√	√	√	√ (via social media)
	Harry	√	√	x (dropped out)	x
	George	√	√	√	x
	Stephen	√	√	√	√
	Jay	√	√	√	√ (via social media)

I primarily held the face-to-face interviews with young people on site during their working day. I could usually find a quiet spot away from the other employees and supervisors to converse with each young person individually. Interviewing young people separately was necessary because of the personal nature of many of the questions I asked.

⁸ All names replaced with pseudonyms.

When querying young people about their pasts, or their aspirations for the future, I did not want their answers to be shaped by what they thought their peers or the supervisor would think of them. Alternatively, if I met young people at the YOT before they began their work for the day, often the interviews would take place in the GL van parked outside. I tried to avoid using a meeting room in the YOT because I wanted to ensure that participants could distinguish me from the YOT professionals. This may have had a detrimental impact upon the information I could gain from interviews. Supervisors also explained that young people associated the meeting rooms in the YOT with negative memories. In the GL van, participants were more relaxed, more talkative and displayed improved mood. This highlights the importance of the setting of the interview.

I also conducted interviews with supervisors. The supervisors in this study had usually observed several previous cohorts of young people complete the GL placement and therefore could articulate, based on their experience, how different aspects of this programme helped young people. This was important because my positionality - discussed in more detail in section 4.7 - meant that in certain respects the supervisor was better placed to interpret the young people's worldviews than I. Holding interviews with supervisors also meant that I could accommodate for the 'Hawthorne effect' during observations – the risk that young people might have behaved differently knowing I was watching them (Chiesa and Hobbs, 2008).

Including **participant observations** within the research design enhanced the knowledge gained as it involved witnessing behaviour and conversations that took place without the researcher's intervention, unlike in interviews (Gray, 2018). Thus, the data collected was potentially more 'natural' and less constructed than in interviews. To conduct participant observations, I travelled with young people and supervisors to their worksites and spent time working alongside them as another employee. I interspaced my visits throughout the young people's six months at the GL to observe their progression through the placement. Data from observations was collected in a primarily unstructured manner. I wrote detailed field notes at the end of each day of fieldwork. These included all I could recollect about what had happened that day – the work that was done, the young people's attitudes and behaviour, any conversations I could recall, etc. In order to ensure that I had not missed any data specifically pertaining to my research aims, I also consulted an observation schedule (see Appendix B.1). This prompted me to consider *inter alia* the indicators of identity change and experiences of meaningful work.

The third method I used to collect data was a **document analysis** of young people's YOT records. Once each cohort had completed their placement with the GL, I would visit

their respective YOTs and gather data from their database. This holds centrally all information that the youth justice system has about each individual young offender. Although systems varied at the different YOTs, these usually contained their official offending records, their Asset assessment by YOT caseworkers, police reports and court documents. I intentionally refrained from collecting data about young people's offending and personal histories while I was conducting participant observations and interviews. This was because I was concerned that knowing this information might influence my interpretations of their attitudes/behaviour in the field and their answers in interviews. It was important that I tried to form an impartial opinion of each young participant. I did not want this to be shaped by reading the YOT professionals' understanding of these young people.

Overall, my priority during data collection was to triangulate data (Denzin, 1970). Using multiple methods meant that each set of data could be used to check the findings from the others (Matthew and Ross, 2010). This increased the reliability of my conclusions. I present a summary of the various methods used to collect data for each of my three main research themes in table 4.3.

Table 4.5 Data collection methods by research theme

	Meaningful Employment	Identity	Desistance
Interviews with young employees	x	x	x
Interviews with supervisors	x	x	x
Participant Observations	x	x	
Document analysis of YOT offending records		x	x
Document analysis of YOT personal histories		x	

I shall now consider in more detail how the chosen methods of data collection aided in investigating my three main themes of interest: meaningful employment, identity and desistance.

4.4.1. Exploring meaningful employment

In this study, I attempted to find out young people's criteria for meaningful employment (**research aim 1**). Did it complement the organisational practices highlighted in the

meaningful employment literature (studies mainly conducted with adult professionals)? Alternatively, did young people have a different conceptualisation of meaningful employment? To find out participants' definitions of meaningful work, I firstly discussed in interviews with young people what sort of work they would like in the future, and what would be important from this employment. I intended that this unstructured conversation would capture which organisational practices youths deemed to be valuable. I then asked participants to complete a framework containing the organisational practices categorised as meaningful by existing scholarship⁹. I requested that they number each organisational practice from 1 to 5, depending on how important the presence of each would be in a future job, with 1 representing not important and 5 as very important. Lastly, I discussed with young people the organisational practices they had mentioned in the open conversation and those they had rated highly in the framework – why were they important? I interpreted from their answers whether young people were describing that such work gave a sense of meaning to their lives. By investigating meaningful employment in this manner I intended to maintain a balance between keeping the conversation open and unguided, and exploring the necessary concepts. I also needed to keep questions simple. It would have been unfeasible to ask young people which organisational practices gave wider purpose, significance or coherence to their lives (King, Heintzelman and Ward's 2016 definition of meaningfulness). Instead, I tried to explore what elements of working young people valued, and then discussed why these were important in more depth, to ascertain if they created meaning.

Once I had established which elements of employment young people considered meaningful, I investigated in interviews the extent to which the GL work programme met these criteria (**research aim 2**). I explored with young people their experiences of working at the GL. I asked open, unguided questions, such as what were the best and worst things about the GL and whether they would have liked to continue working there after the six months. I also used the meaningful organisational practices previously established by scholars and those constructed by the participants themselves to explore whether working at the GL was 'meaningful employment' to these young people. For example, I asked young people if their work at the GL 'did good', whether they had bonded with their co-workers, what they had learnt/achieved when they were at the GL etc.

I also wished to determine in interviews whether young people had what Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski (2010) term 'work orientations', as this could help me understand why they might consider certain organisational practices meaningful. Chapter 2 outlined work orientations in more detail. Scholarship has primarily investigated work orientations by

⁹ See this framework in the 3-month interview schedule in Appendix B.3

asking individuals the 'lottery question' (see Morse and Weiss, 1955; Vecchio, 1980; Arvey, Harpaz, and Liao, 2004; Highhouse, Zickar, and Yankelevich, 2010). Therefore, I asked young participants if they won the lottery and consequently had financial security for life, whether they would want to continue working. By asking people if they would remain in the work force if they could afford not to, this could determine the centrality of work to these individuals. If a young person answered 'no', this suggested they had an inherent 'means to an end' work orientation – work was primarily a means to earn a living. Alternatively, if a young person answered in the affirmative, they believed there was an inherent value in working beyond financial gain.

I also used interviews with supervisors and my own participant observations to investigate young people's perceptions of meaningful work. For example, I inquired with supervisors and I observed myself how young people engaged with different types of work and which they responded most positively to. However, I comprehended meaningful employment as the subjective understanding of the young participants of this project. This follows existing literature; as King, Heintzelman, and Ward (2016) explain, work is not simply meaningful or not, it is experienced as meaningful by the individual. I also understood meaningful employment in this manner because I was particularly interested in what the young participants in this study considered to be meaningful employment. Existing literature has mainly focused upon the experiences of adult professionals.

4.4.2. Investigating identity

In many previous studies, to explore identity, researchers conducted narrative interviews (see for example Bachman, 2016; Carlsson, 2013; Gadd and Farrall, 2004; King, 2012; Maruna, 2001; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016; Presser, 2016). These involve the interviewer asking offenders to tell their life story, from their childhood, through to onset of offending and the present day. Psychologists tell us that our identity is based upon our own internal 'self-story' (Dingfelder, 2011; Stevens, 2012). Consequently, narrative interviews can be interpretive devices, through which people represent their identity to themselves and to others (Lawler, 2002). However, because this project explored not just identity, but also meaningful employment and desistance, I conducted interviews that included questions designed to elucidate self-narratives from young people, but the interview was not exclusively focused upon producing an autobiographical account of the their lives. For example, I asked participants how they became involved in offending, what happened in their most recent offence, what they were doing before they started the GL, their experiences during their placement etc. I was particularly interested in how young people described their past negative behaviours, such as crime, now that they are working at the GL. Scholars explain that desisters redefine their past negative behaviours – particularly their involvement

in crime – to be consistent with their new law-abiding self (Maruna, 2001; Maruna and Roy, 2007 and Harris, 2011).

In the interviews with young people, I also discussed their plans and aspirations. For example, I asked participants what they desired most in the future, whether they thought they would reoffend in the future, what their plans were for after the GL, where they thought they would be in five years' time and what they feared the most from their future. Scholarship explains that the formation of a desistance-supporting identity requires a shift in goals: to achieve an imagined pro-social self (Healy and Donnell, 2008) and to avoid an imagined feared self (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009).

To aid my investigation into whether there had been a change in young people's identities during/following their participation in meaningful work (**research aim 3**), I asked narrative questions at various time intervals. For example, I asked young people to recount past events in the 0-months, 3-months and 6-months interviews. Moreover, I asked young people to describe their plans and desires for the future in the 0-months, 3-months, 6-months and 1-year interviews. Through these interspaced accounts, I could decipher how young people's self-stories and their imagined future-self developed throughout their placement at the GL. Furthermore, in the 6-month interview, I asked young people to self-evaluate and reflect on how they thought they had changed during their time at the GL and how the programme had affected this change.

I also considered whether working at the GL impacts identity by asking young people in interviews to describe how they thought other people viewed them, since they had been working on the scheme. In particular, I asked young people about their co-workers at the GL, the supervisor, their friends outside, their family/carers and strangers who observed them working. Embedded in these discussions are perceptions of self-identity. As discussed in chapter 3, psychologists avow that one's identity consists of both a private self-image and a social identity that is bestowed upon the individual by others, where the latter greatly influences the former (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1956; Matsueda and Heimer, 1987; Jenkins, 2004). Therefore, if young people feel that others view them differently when they are working at or since they have been working at the GL, then this may indicate that engagement in this programme is promoting a psychological shift in who they see themselves as. In particular, if young people describe others attaching 'pro-social' labels to them, then this makes their transformation to a 'pro-social' identity more probable.

Interviews with supervisors were another source of information on the identity development of young people during their participation at the GL. For example, I asked

supervisors how they thought each young person had changed throughout their placement at the GL.

During participant observations, I had to consider what the observable indications of identity reconstruction might be. For example, changes in the behaviour and attitudes of young people during their time at the GL could suggest a change in mind-set. It is well-established in the psychological field that a change in who we see ourselves as can give rise to a change in behaviour; 'identity' provides a direction for, and will be consistent with, our actions (Matsueda, 1992; Reynolds and Ceranic, 2007). Furthermore, observation of interactions with passers-by, co-workers and supervisors could reveal hints about a young person's identity. Consistent with Cooley's (1902) notion of a 'looking glass' self, how young people interact with others and the responses they receive will reflect upon their identity. Nevertheless, because I only observed young people whilst they were working at the GL, this limited the knowledge I gained from participant observations. To enhance the validity of my conclusions regarding young people's identities, it would have been preferable to also observe them in their lives outside the GL, when they were with their friends or family. However, such an ethnographic study was beyond what was required to meet my research aims and would have been unfeasible, due to the many ethical issues it would have presented.

When analysing the various documents contained in young people's YOT records, I collected data about their personal circumstances. I paid particular attention to reports of their school experiences, their peer group and wider network, experiences of other employment/training, their living arrangements and family circumstances. The aim of gathering such data was to compare the YOT professionals' accounts of these young people's lives with young people's narratives in interviews. How did they differ? What did this suggest about the 'self' they were presenting to me? I also collected data regarding young people's offences, with a particular focus on the circumstances surrounding their most recent offence. In interviews, I asked young people to describe to me what had happened in their most recent offence. Therefore, by also gathering this data from YOT records, I could compare police/YOT workers descriptions of the events of this offence with the account young people gave me in the interviews. How did young people choose to present past negative events? What implications did this have for the identity they were constructing for themselves?

However, it should be acknowledged that the reports of YOT professionals are not completely objective accounts of these young people's lives. They are still conclusions formed by subjective individuals, following discourses with young people and other relevant

individuals. Whilst I have no doubt that youth justice workers are particularly skilled at obtaining the ‘true story’ of the events in these young people’s lives, there is still the risk that young people have been dishonest in their meetings with YOT caseworkers. Moreover, the youth justice professionals’ opinions and judgements of participants may be shaped by their extensive experience of working with other young offenders.

It is also important to clarify that I did not take YOT professionals or GL supervisors’ opinions of young people to constitute their identity. As established in chapter 1, an individual’s identity resides in his or her own mind. It may be shaped by others act towards that young person (for example if they treat them as an offender or not) but what another individual thinks of that young person is irrelevant to their identity (if they are not aware of the opinion). However, by consulting multiple sources (including my own and others reports of their behaviour/attitudes etc.) this provided me with more ‘clues’ as to the ‘self’ that that young person perceived themselves to be. Bagnoli (2012) advocates using a mixed-methods approach to investigate identity because it can allow one to see the different - and often contradictory - self-representations that a person presents. By triangulating data in this manner, I had a greater guarantee that I had interpreted young people’s identities correctly.

4.4.3. Considering desistance

A source of information on desistance was the official offending records held for each young person at the YOT. These included the date and description (including the disposal given) of every offence police had recorded for participants. The seriousness of each offence was graded according to the Youth Justice Board’s system. Utilising this data I could compare each individual’s average offending volume, frequency and seriousness pre, during and after engaging in employment at the GL. Thus, this indicated whether the GL influenced the offending behaviours of young participants. This was important when investigating the impact of meaningful employment upon desistance (**research aim 4**).

However, there are limitations to using official offending statistics. Primarily, they may not capture all criminal activity that an individual is involved in (Bottomley and Pease, 1986; Maguire, 2007; Office for National Statistics, 2019). As stated by Laub and Sampson (2001) official data should be used with great caution – any declines may be due to the offender becoming more proficient at eluding arrest. Indeed, Barclay and Tavares (1999) estimate that of all offences committed, only 45% will be reported to the police, only 24% will be recorded by the police and only 3% will result in a caution or conviction. When collecting data from young people’s records I ignored any offences that had been ‘withdrawn’, ‘discontinued’, ‘dismissed’ or where they were found ‘not guilty’. However,

there is of course a possibility that young people did commit these offences; they were just unable to be prosecuted for them.

Therefore, to overcome these limitations, my conclusions regarding young people's desistance were also based on self-reported offending in interviews. I asked young people in the 6-month and 12-month interviews whether they had reoffended during the past six months and whether they thought they would reoffend in the future. Importantly, I also asked young people (if they reported reducing their offending) what was making them desist and whether the GL had helped at all. There was a risk that by considering offending records only, it may have been another factor, beyond engagement in the GL, which had supported their desistance during this period.

Nonetheless, there is still the possibility that young people may have been unwilling to disclose their criminal activities in interviews and therefore I used interviews with supervisors as another source of information. I asked supervisors if they thought any of the young employees were still offending, what point they believed each young person had stopped offending (if they had) and why: had the GL had an impact? I also asked supervisors what each young person's prospects for staying crime-free in the future were. Their opinions were a particularly important gauge of young people's desistance. GL supervisors do much more than oversee the young people's work; they try to build a relationship with each young person and help them with issues they may have in their lives outside the GL. Throughout the six months, supervisors accumulate 'insider knowledge' of each employee's personal circumstances and the external influences these young people are involved with. Moreover, because each GL is affiliated with a YOT, and because of the typical structure of YOTs in England, with many agencies working in the same building, this meant that supervisors often had close connections with law enforcement, social services, drug services etc. who would share information about these young people.

Therefore, in contrast to my approach to understanding 'meaningful employment' and 'identity', I did not consider 'desistance' in this project purely from the young participants' perspective. Whilst I took into account self-reported offending, I also relied on supervisors' reports and official offending records. In this study, I did not consider it sufficient for young people to believe that they were desisting for them to be desisters, I wanted to know whether this was a reality, in terms of whether they were actually still engaging in illegal behaviours and the extent of this. Identity and meaning can necessarily be understood as subjective concepts that have resonance to each individual. However, the committing of crime is a behaviour that can be empirically witnessed and measured. One of the purposes of conducting this study was to contribute to an understanding of what can

reduce criminal behaviour among youths. Therefore, it was necessary that I objectively (as far as possible) determined how engaging in the GL affects desistance.

I considered desistance to be a process in this study (see chapter 1) and therefore I did not classify only those young people who had stopped offending completely during or following GL involvement as desisters. Instead, I looked for a noticeable change in offending volume, frequency or seriousness. Once I had established who the desisters and persisters were, I could compare the experiences and articulations of these two groups. Were there notable differences in how those who continue to offend during and after the GL understand meaningful employment? Can it be confirmed that young people who persisted in offending had not reconfigured a new identity for themselves, as Maruna's (2001) research would propose?

4.5. Methods of data analysis

The analysis of the quantitative data collected in this study was simple. To calculate the (official) offending volume for each young person pre-GL involvement, I counted how many offences they committed every three-month period from their onset of offending up until the commencement of the GL, and then took an average. By repeating this process for the six-month GL period and for six months after they left, I could compare average offending volume pre, during and after GL involvement for each individual (see table 7.1). To calculate the (official) offending frequency for each young person pre-GL involvement, I counted how many 'offending incidents' occurred for each individual every three-month period from their onset of offending up until the commencement of the GL, and then took an average. For example, if a young person was involved in joyriding, despite this potentially consisting of four different offences (e.g. taking a vehicle without the owner's consent, driving without a licence, driving without insurance and dangerous driving) I would still only count this as one 'offending incident'. This approach, as compared to calculating the volume of offences, gave a more measured account of the amount of offending each individual was involved with. By repeating this process for the six-month GL period and for six months after they left, I could compare average offending frequency pre, during and after GL involvement for each individual (see table 7.2). To calculate offending seriousness for each young person pre-GL involvement, I graded each of their offences from onset up until the commencement of the GL using the Youth Justice Board's 1 (least serious) to 8 (most serious) scale. I then took an average. By doing this for offences committed during the six-month GL period and for six months after they left, I could compare average offending seriousness pre, during and after GL involvement for each participant (see table 7.3). For the quantitative element of my research into young people's conceptions of meaningful

employment, I took an average of the scores young people gave (out of 5) for each of the organisational practices deemed to be meaningful in existing literature (see table 5.2).

I thematically analysed my interview transcripts, field notes and notes from the YOT document analysis. This involved thoroughly reading all notes and transcripts, and then coding all data. Firstly, I coded based on sensitising categories; those that were based upon the research aims and the existing desistance and meaningful employment literature. Gibson and Brown (2009) term these ‘apriori’ codes. For example, upper-level apriori codes involved ‘desistance’ and ‘meaningful employment’. Lower-level codes within the meaningful employment theme were based on the typology established in chapter 2, such as ‘doing good’, ‘achievement’, ‘interest’, ‘education’, ‘stability’, ‘money’, etc. I then read all the data again and coded based on emerging (inductive) categories, those that appear through the exploration of data, which Gibson and Brown term ‘empirical’ codes. This meant I could determine sub-categories within the theme of desistance informed by my findings with the young participants, rather than based upon what had been previously found in other research. Similarly, within the meaningful employment theme, by forming sub-categories based upon my reading of the data, rather than solely applying the typology of meaningful employment practices drawn from previous research, I could be receptive to the employment practices that these young people in particular found meaningful.

Ultimately, what themes I considered important were based upon their relevance to the research aims. Therefore, I used what Thomas (2006) terms a ‘general inductive approach’. I aimed to discover the core meanings evident in the data relevant to the research aims. This is different to Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) grounded theory, which seeks to generate or discover theory using open coding. In grounded theory there is no prior definition of codes, however in my project the pre-determination of some codes was necessary to ensure that I met my research aims. With grounded theory, all data and categories may be drawn upon to produce a theory. I disregarded codes that did not belong within the themes relevant to my research aims. Also in grounded theory, emerging subthemes dictate the collection and analysis of further data – data collection and data analysis take place simultaneously. My interview and observation schedules were mainly planned in advance of the data collection taking place to ensure that I investigated the key themes within the longitudinal design.

The data arising from questions designed to elucidate young people’s self-narratives (questions such as ‘what brought you to the GL, what’s your story?’ and ‘can you tell me the story of your last offence, what caused it, what happened?’) I evaluated using a narrative analysis approach. I was interested in both what was narrated and how it was narrated. I

compared young people's stories with the alternative account presented in their YOT records. What events had young people chosen to tell me in their stories? As stated by Presser (2013), sometimes in narrative interviews what is *not* said is very important. I also analysed *how* young people chose to tell their self-stories, including their past experiences of offending. I took guidance from O'Connor (2000) and Presser and Sandburg (2015) who outline the importance of metaphors, genre, symbolic boundary drawing, justifying devices, deflecting agency, repetitions and inconsistencies when conducting narrative analysis.

Two different forms of analysis were used for the qualitative data because of the particular research aims of this project. When examining young people's identities, one of the ways in which I did this was by analysing their self-stories. Thus, a narrative analysis approach was necessary for this data. However, exploring young people's conceptions of meaningful employment required a thematic analysis, to draw out the main themes from this particular group's opinions of what type of employment brings meaning to their lives.

4.6. Ethical considerations

This project was approved by the Northumbria University Ethics Committee. Conducting observations and interviews with young people, most of whom had long been disengaged from school, presented a potential ethical issue. They may have been less able to comprehend the nature of the research and the risks of participating (Caulfield and Hill, 2014). I mitigated this by designing user-friendly information sheets for young people and I spent time explaining the nature of the project to participants. I also gained the consent of a parent/guardian for under-18s to participate. See information sheets and consent forms in Appendix A.

Ethical concerns were also raised by my collection of sensitive information. In particular, the data collected from YOT records contained personal details regarding young people, their families and their offending histories. Any disclosure of this information had potential to cause harm to the participants. Therefore, high standards of anonymity and confidentiality were used throughout the research process. I created pseudonyms for all research participants and for the GL locations. These were used in the data collection, analysis and write-up stages. Particular care was also taken to store electronic and paper data securely. There is a possibility that some YOT professionals and GL supervisors would be able to identify young people from the information I described, if they were inclined to read my thesis carefully. Nevertheless, I believe there is no risk of harm to participants. Youth justice practitioners are bound by the confidentiality practices of their institution, and so can

be trusted not to use this information in any way that would be detrimental to the wellbeing of their clients.

There was also a risk of harm to participants when exploring their self-stories in interviews. Reviewing past mistakes and traumatic events may have been upsetting for participants. However, to mitigate this risk of harm, I aimed to end each interview positively, for example by asking young people about their future plans and goals. Furthermore, interviews usually took place at the beginning of young people's working day and therefore, as I was also conducting participant observations, I could observe and check that participants were feeling ok for a period after the interview. In addition, I perceived that some participants found it beneficial sharing their stories with me. Indeed, some youths thanked me for listening to their stories. As Gouthro (2014) avows, narrative interviews can be therapeutic for the participants.

A more complex ethical issue was that in this project I effectively befriended young people with the intention to access information from them. I made participants aware at the beginning of the data collection process that I was conducting research, and they signed informed consent forms to this effect. Nonetheless, there was a chance that, as I spent more time in the field and made efforts to distance myself from the role of researcher, young people to a certain extent forgot that I was there to analyse them and their responses to employment. However, I believe that I could not have obtained such rich data if young people were repeatedly reminded that I was conducting research. Building a degree of friendship with participants was essential to obtain honest accounts of their self-stories and experiences of employment. Moreover, during the research process, I did not simply enter these young people's lives for a few months and then abandon them when my research was completed. I worked with young people intermittently throughout their six-month placement at the GL; in particular, I aimed to be there on both their first and last weeks. My presence at the GL and any support this gave them became effectively part of their experience of this programme. The time at which I removed myself from their lives was when they were leaving their employment with the GL, and the supportive environment created by the supervisor, behind.

4.7. Reflections and Limitations

This section reflects upon some of the challenges I faced when carrying out this research. In particular, I focus on the differences in positionality between myself and the participants and the implications this had for data collection and analysis. Furthermore, I outline some of the difficulties in conducting research where the participants are young people with a history of criminal justice involvement.

4.7.1. Researcher positionality

My positionality was very different to the research participants. Almost all the participants were from an impoverished social background; many resided in families dependent on state-welfare. Furthermore, almost all of the young people had experienced traumatic events in their lives. Many had been abused or neglected by family members or had been exposed to domestic violence in their homes. One young person had even experienced the murder of a family member. In addition, a disproportionate number of young people had been in the care system, after being removed from households where parents were criminals and/or drug users. Many young people had unstable living situations, and some had been homeless. Because I had not experienced these issues myself, attempting to truly understand these young people's worldview was difficult.

This distance between the research participants and myself may have compromised the integrity of my **data collection**. Had I been closer in positionality to my participants, I may have collected richer data during interviews, as young people would have felt I was more relatable and therefore a more suitable confidant. I lacked what Caelli, Ray and Mill (2003) term 'cultural credibility'. As stated by Pasupathi and Rich (2005), the telling of self-narratives is influenced by who is being told the story and their reaction to it. Appearing as both a female and a student put me firmly in the non-offending category to young people. This might have made them less willing to represent themselves as an offender or ex-offender in their narratives. Therefore, it was sometimes difficult to determine why young people presented themselves and their offending histories in a more positive light in comparison to what supervisors/YOT professionals described. Was it because they were trying to separate themselves from who they were before in order to embark upon a new identity? Or did they just think that 'someone like me' would judge them if they gave an honest account of their past?

Nonetheless, by including participant observations in the research design, this gave me an opportunity to build rapport with young people. Although I could never claim to be a true 'insider', the small number of youths in each cohort and the time I spent with them, meant that we gained shared experiences. During observations I did not make a special effort to ask young people questions about themselves and their desistance journey – I left this to the interviews. Instead, I tried to bond with young people, by mucking in with the work, getting involved in the banter of the group and generally engaging in small talk with young people – but not prying into their lives. My research confirms Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995) assertions regarding the value of pure sociability as a means of building trust. Thus including observations in my research design allowed me to collect richer and thicker data during interviews than I would have been able to do otherwise.

Furthermore, as stated by Kohl and McCutcheon (2014) some aspects of positionality are fluid; we choose how to perform our identity in the research setting. I made a conscious effort to manipulate my positionality to appear to young people as someone they would feel comfortable expressing their opinions and telling their stories to; for example, in the way I dressed, spoke, my topics of conversation, etc. In particular I emphasised my 'youth', presenting myself as someone only a few years older than the GL participants, who they could still have 'banter' with, and not like the many state professionals they come into frequent contact with. I aimed to present myself as their equal, not a person in authority. Moreover, I hoped that by displaying empathy, acknowledging what the young people were saying without judgement and occasionally sharing relevant stories about myself, participants would feel that they could represent their 'true selves' to me in interviews.

Moreover, I believe the distance between the participants and myself may have had some benefits to data collection. In some instances, participants will be more likely to confide in the researcher if they are *not* an insider. Bucerius (2013, 2015) found this in her ethnographic research with male Muslim drug dealers. Because she was not a Muslim woman, her participants felt she did not need to be shielded from information about men, drugs or violence that might make her 'impure'. Therefore, by being an outsider, the participants felt more comfortable confiding in her. In a similar vein, in my study, a young person shared information with me about an ongoing gang conflict in their neighbourhood. I believe the reason they felt they could share this sensitive information with me was because they knew it was highly unlikely I would have known any of the people involved or been affiliated to one of the rival gangs. In this instance, my outsider position was an advantage.

In considering positionality during data collection, issues of gender must necessarily also be addressed. Almost all the GL employees were male. Because of this, the participants and I will have, from birth, been separately influenced by societally prescribed ideals of maleness and femaleness. This will inevitably have caused us to see the world differently, to have different life expectations, experiences, etc (see for example research by Yelland, 1998; Bussey, Bandura and Bjork, 1999; Kane, 2013; Saewyc, 2017 into the effects of gender roles). Therefore, there may have been elements of young people's 'male' identity that I neglected to fully understand and capture during my research.

However, there were benefits to being female when collecting data for this project. My experiences confirm the findings of Bryman (2000), who reports that females can be less threatening than males in the field, which facilitates trust and encourages communication. Bucerius (2015) states that when researching hegemonic masculine populations - such as groups of young offenders - male researchers may have to 'prove' themselves as men to win

respect and receive insider knowledge. Female researchers are not expected to engage in such 'manhood' acts. I believe this was the case during my fieldwork. At no point did I feel the need to prove my capabilities to participants. In fact, young people saw any displays of incompetence when I was partaking in the GL work as endearing, rather than a sign of weakness. It is unlikely this would have been the case had I been male. Indeed, Soyer (2014) recommended three options for female researchers when entering a male-dominated research setting. They can deemphasize their femininity by dressing a certain way, play along with stereotypical social roles (such as that of the helpless and inept woman) or limit reciprocity with male research subjects. The second of these was the most useful in my fieldwork. It made me appear less threatening, building rapport between us and therefore improving data collection.

The process of **data analysis** in this project will also have been influenced by my positionality. It is inevitable that knowledge generated in qualitative data analysis will be situated and not value-free, as each researcher's interpretation will be different depending upon their positionality (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). However, the considerable distance between my own and the participants' world-view might have meant this problem was exaggerated. As stated by Gouthro (2014: 90) -

'we are often better able to make sense of other people's experiences when we can make connections to our own background and shared repertoire of understanding'.

During analysis, I was trying to understand individuals' identities that had often been shaped by life experiences that I found difficult to comprehend, much less relate to. However, a way in which I accommodated for this was by also conducting interviews with the supervisor, for their opinions on each young person's desistance journey. The supervisor was much closer in positionality to the participants. All supervisors were male and some expressed that they too had been involved in deviant behaviour in their youth.

In retrospect, I believe observing participants' lives outside work would have put the data in greater context and better informed analysis. Such in-depth ethnographic work, where researchers seek to understand their research participants' worldview has proven to be very effective (see Blackman and Commane, 2012 and Bucerius, 2015). However to sufficiently immerse myself into these young people's lives would have been unfeasible within the time-frame for this research, especially as participants resided in many different geographical areas. In addition, the youths in this study were between the ages of 16-18 and had histories of various risk-taking behaviours, including involvement in crime. To spend time in uncontrolled environments with these individuals would have raised numerous ethical issues.

4.7.2. Young offenders as participants

Conducting research with the participants in this study presented a number of challenges. The young GL employees could be mistrustful of others. They had too frequently been questioned by individuals who have control over their lives, such as police officers, social workers, youth justice workers, etc. As stated by a GL supervisor: ‘they have learned to keep their mouths shut. No-one can get you for anything if you keep your mouth shut.’ This ingrained attitude presented a challenge when collecting data from these participants, in particular with regards to whether they were still offending. Indeed, after I confided in the supervisor that I felt a participant, Gary, had not told me the truth during interviews, the supervisor informed me that Gary had had the same social worker for three years and still would not share anything about his life with her. The fact that in some instances trained youth workers had not managed to build a trusting relationship with young people demonstrates the challenge I faced in interviews. Moreover, as the majority of participants were young males, talking about their experiences and feelings certainly did not fit with the ‘machismo’ ideal that they had been culturally prescribed to follow. Furthermore, some young people lacked the confidence to express themselves fully, at least in early interviews. They did not make eye contact and were inclined to putting on a ‘hard man’ front. However, these concerns were mitigated somewhat by conducting successive interviews with each young person and by using participant observations and YOT document analysis as other methods of data collection.

There were also limitations when trying to obtain young people’s self-stories. Interviews with questions designed to elucidate self-narratives, such as those I conducted, work best with minimum interference from the interviewer as this gives the participant maximum freedom to present their self-story in their own words (Presser, 2010). However, this proved to be difficult to do with the participants in this study. Often young people lacked the confidence, motivation or communication skills to ‘tell a story’ about their time before and during the GL. Indeed, Swain (2016) estimates that 50% to 60% of male young offenders have a clinically significant language learning disorder, which can affect narrative skills. Although I was not always privy to this information, it is likely that some of the participants suffered from this, and trying to explain their stories was tough for them. Therefore, frequent prompting, questioning and surmising of young people’s meaning was required during interviews. This necessarily detracted from the authenticity of their accounts and my subsequent inference of their identity.

Moreover, the GL youths, much more than other young people their age, are used to ‘telling their story’. They frequently had to account for themselves and their actions to youth

justice workers, residential support workers, housing officers, social workers etc. It is likely that some of my interview questions were similar to what young people were routinely asked by state professionals. As Gardner (2010) reports, talking about ‘their future’ can often become an ‘institutional compulsion’ for young offenders due to their repeated experiences of discussing the concept with judges, police, social workers and other professionals. An implication of this for my research was that young people may have formed a self-story that presents them positively, that they regurgitate to all ‘officials’ they meet. They have learnt what the various state professionals want and need to hear from them and so this way of presenting themselves is ingrained. There is a possibility that young people were not presenting the story to me that, for example, they would have told to their friends. Therefore, it was difficult to determine whether participants wished to reconstruct their identity, and this was why they presented themselves perhaps more favourably than the reality, or whether they were just telling me the story they had learned that the various interrogators in their lives wanted to hear.

However, these concerns do not undermine the value of this research into young offenders’ identities. As explained in the positionality section, I made an effort not to appear as a ‘professional’ to young people, but rather someone less official and more relatable. Therefore, I trust that at least some of the young people will not have felt that they needed to tell me the story they tell to youth justice officials. Moreover, every self-narrative is shaped to what we believe the listener will respond well to. As stated by Presser and Sandburg (2015), stories are co-produced; they are influenced by who the story is being told to. Therefore, it was an inevitable and inescapable issue that young people will have tailored their story to the listener – myself.

Another issue when conducting research with the participants of this study was their ‘transience’. As noted earlier, I initially intended to hold all six-month follow up interviews by phone. However, most young people had changed phone number during this period. The supervisor explained that this was typical of this population –

“Wouldn’t give weh the right addresses, telephone numbers, so the police says that’s historical within the family. Cos they are so transient. You know from houses, from the housing association or private landlords now. Hard to keep track of, but again that is a family trait.”

Interestingly, it was young people’s social media accounts, rather than their phone numbers or even home addresses that were most constant. Contacting young people by an online messaging service allowed me to ask questions such as what they had done after leaving the GL, more details about any work/employment they had engaged in, whether they felt they had benefitted from participating in the scheme and what their plans for the future were.

Young people's replies were usually sufficiently detailed to establish whether they had moved into meaningful employment post-GL, and whether this was something that they desired in the future. However, they were not the 'self-narratives' that I aimed to collect to explore young people's identity development since leaving the scheme. I could not establish whether young people's identities were more or less pro-social than they had been during GL participation from the short amounts of text they sent. Moreover, there were ten young people with whom I was unable to conduct follow-up interviews, because they could not be reached by phone or social media. Four of these individuals would have been particularly difficult to contact as they were incarcerated.

Therefore, the difficulties in regaining contact with participants affected my ability to investigate research aim 3 of this project – to establish the impact of meaningful employment upon young people's identities. In particular, the inferences made in chapter 6 regarding young people's narratives post-GL were largely based on the responses of only the five young people who were able to be contacted by phone.

4.8. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined my methods of data collection and analysis and explained why these were necessary for this research. Multiple methods were required to investigate meaningful employment in this project. I explored young people's conceptions of meaningful employment through a mixture of quantitative and qualitative questions in interviews. I then established the extent to which the GL represented meaningful employment to participants through interviews and observations of their engagement in the work programme. In order to explore young people's identities, multiple methods were also required. Specifically, I used participant observations, interviews with young people, interviews with supervisors and I conducted a document analysis of YOT records. By gathering data from these various sources, I gained more 'clues' as to the 'self' that the young person perceived themselves to be. To explore desistance reliably in this study a combination of methods was again necessary. I considered whether each participant was desisting from their self-reports of offending in interviews, by consulting supervisors' opinions and from an analysis of young people's official offending records up until six months after they completed the GL programme. Triangulating data in this way overcome issues with the reliability of official statistics. I will outline my findings surrounding meaningful employment, identity and desistance in chapters 5, 6 and 7 respectively.

Furthermore, I reflected in this chapter how issues of researcher/participant positionality could have impacted upon the research process, but also how these can be

minimised. Conducting research with young people with a history of criminal justice involvement presents particular challenges, and accounting for the impact this may have upon data collection and analysis is important. However, as I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter, there are ways to build trust and rapport with young offenders and negotiate one's positionality to not be at such odds with that of the participants.

5. Findings: Young offenders' conceptions of meaningful employment

5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents my findings regarding participants' conceptions of meaningful employment. Firstly, I outline the extent to which the typology of meaningful organisational practices I constructed in chapter 2 met young people's criteria for meaningful work. I created this typology based on existing research, which has mainly been conducted with adult professionals. I consider in this chapter whether young people find such practices meaningful, and why: what is the source of meaning and is this the same as for adults? Secondly, I detail the other organisational practices young people described as engendering meaning in their work that were not specified by adult professionals. Finally, I present an updated typology of organisational practices that participants find meaningful. Throughout this chapter, I also discuss the extent to which the GL scheme met young people's criteria for meaningful work.

5.2. Organisational practices from existing typology

This section considers whether the seven organisational practices referred to in existing literature formed a part of the definition of meaningful employment for the participants of this study.

5.2.1. Provides work which 'does good'

I observed during my time at the GL that young people particularly enjoyed doing work that they knew would have a direct beneficiary. By contrast, they found it very demoralising to do work that they deemed to have no wider consequence upon the world. For example, Darrell described -

“The work we were doing today was important because the wall will look nice for when people walk past with their dogs. The tree-planting jobs they are important for obviously the environment itself. But there's a mix – some is pointless. We were putting flowers in a flowerbed outside a cabin on a building site, but it's just where people go to put their timesheets in.”

Thus, Darrell only perceived that work that had benefits for the greater good was purposeful. The flower planting he described was unlikely to be appreciated by many, and as they were planted on a building site, were likely to be temporary. It was important to young people that their good work 'lasts'. For example, I witnessed young people's annoyance when they cleaned up a playground only to later find it had been vandalised again. Moreover, I observed their frustration if the vegetation they had spent hours cutting back to help prevent flooding was left to grow back in by the council. Despite the fact that young people were paid regardless, many felt dissatisfaction if they believed their work served no wider

purpose. Thus, this suggests that work with transcendent benefits was meaningful to young people for the same reason as adult employees (see Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009; Bailey and Madden, 2015; Allan, Duffy and Collision, 2017); it gave them a sense that they had an impact upon the world.

Some young people found meaning in work that ‘does good’ because it engendered the positive reactions of others. This was also found with adult professionals (see Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski, 2010). Young people valued work that other people would be able to see and appreciate. For example, I asked Julie what had motivated her not to drop out of the GL. She replied -

“You are actually doing something that people realise. Like when we were literally like just taking like plastic tree guards off the trees we were just like aww no one’s going to know that we’ve done this... and like five passerby’s were like aww you’s are doing a fantastic job and the neighbourhood actually realises what you are doing and they appreciate it.”

Similarly, John explained -

“It’s making it a better place isn’t it? When we done the fencing all the fences were like broken down and that and by the end it was spotless ... Everyone was telling weh we were doing a good job. It was worth our time doing that job...with all the thanks and that we were getting and that it felt good to actually be doing something”

The community had a positive response to young people’s work at the GL. Frequently passers-by would take the time to compliment employees on the work they were doing. Many thanked them for doing work that had long been required in the community, which no one else seemed to be willing to do. The positive feedback young people received from others in the community added to their sense that the work they were doing made a real difference and was purposeful. As described in chapter 2, feeling that others view your work role positively is a crucial source of meaning.

Consequently, as with adult professionals, young people found meaning in work that ‘does good’ because they perceived that their work served a wider purpose and because of the positive reactions from others. Much of the work young people engaged in at the GL benefitted the local communities in which it was carried out. For example, frequently young people were involved in the clearance of waterways. This helped the environment as it reduced pollution in the water, which provided improved habitats for plants and wildlife. It also was beneficial to the people living near these waterways, as it improved the aesthetic appeal of the area, prevented blockages and averted flooding. Although, as described by Darrell above, some tasks lacked a clear purpose, most of the work at the GL had a visible

benefit for the greater good. This helped young people find meaning in their work during their participation in the employment programme.

5.2.2. Provides opportunities for ‘learning’

Young people participating in the GL had long been disengaged from formal education. Most were excluded from school by age 12/13 after many years of truancy and suspensions for problematic behaviour. Thereafter they received piecemeal education in various pupil referral units and alternative educational providers for excluded children. Very few of the participants had any official qualifications.

Despite young people's limited experiences of education, many described employment that provided opportunities for learning as meaningful. Several participants expressed regrets that they had not attended school when they were younger and gained qualifications. They were aware of the limitations this would have in terms of gaining future employment. Indeed, the most frequent explanation I was given by young people as to why they thought learning at work was important was because they believed this would lead to a better future. For example, Max expressed that if he could gain qualifications or learn a new skill he could ‘go anywhere’. It was found by Park and Choi (2016) that employee learning can be meaningful if the employee already recognises learning as valuable. Due to their belief that an increase in skills would lead to desirable outcomes, learning was inherently valuable to the young participants.

Indeed, most young people preferred the more skilled and challenging work that they engaged in at the GL. In addition to fulfilling their desire to learn, this may be attributed to the fact that young people felt that more skilled work was what ‘adult workers’ did. This is illustrated by my conversation with Jay –

Me: “What type of work do you like best?”

Jay: “God anything but litter-picking that’s just shit, does my head in like a said ... the fencing, I enjoyed the fencing, its proper work you nah. Me mates’ Dad puts fences up and he can make like 300 quid.”

Me: “What did you enjoy about fencing?”

Jay: “Well, you’ve got to do the heighting and the measuring. Bit more of a challenge, it’s just work, its proper work. I enjoy working. Like with the fencing, I’ve got a job to do and I’ll do it, get me head down and get it done.”

Jay repeatedly references fencing as ‘proper work’ and a ‘job’, which demonstrates how he believed this skilled activity was representative of adult employment. By contrast, litter picking was not considered to be proper employment by young people - despite the fact that

many adults are employed in this occupation. This is because participants associated litter picking with juvenile reparations. As Glenn details –

“It’s like we are doing community service. Cos obviously when we’re doing the litter picking with our coats and that on...”

The participants of this study desired the higher social status of ‘adult worker’ rather than ‘young offender’. Skilled work that achieved this desire could therefore invoke feelings of meaningfulness; work that young people connected with juvenile reparations could not.

Why was it important to young people to do work with ‘adult’ status? Moffitt (1993) explains that adolescence is a time where young people feel like an adult, and biologically have become an adult, but are largely treated by society as a child. There is a ‘maturity gap’ between biological age and social age. Proving maturity and autonomy are very important at this time, and according to Moffitt this can explain why so many individuals offend at this age – it is a method of demonstrating agency. Unfortunately, Massoglia and Uggen (2010) report that delinquent youths are even less likely to be viewed as mature by adults because of their behaviours. The young participants of my study had all been involved in offending and therefore may have been searching for this sense of autonomy that Moffitt describes. As achieving ‘adult status’ is therefore something these young people particularly value, employment that fulfils this will necessarily be meaningful as it reverberates with their ultimate concerns. As Steger, Dik and Duffy (2012) describe, such employment will allow young people to find ‘psychological meaningfulness in work’.

Therefore, another reason why some young people found meaning in employment that involves learning/skill development was that they perceived this to be equivalent to adult employment. At the GL, young people had some opportunities for learning. Although the environmental and horticultural work that young people carried out at all three GL sites tended to involve only simple physical labouring abilities, some knowledge was required, for example how to work safely in water, or how to operate garden tools. Occasionally the commercial or heritage work young people were engaged in involved more technical knowledge, such as fencing or dry stone walling. In all types of work, general skills such as team working, self-motivation and problem solving were advanced. Furthermore, Telville cohort 1 had the opportunity to attend a building college during their time at the GL, where they learnt the basics of bricklaying, plastering or joinery. Moreover, some young people studied for the Construction Skills Certification Scheme Card whilst at the GL, where they learnt health and safety skills for working on a building site.

Supervisors made a considerable effort to ensure that young people learned something during their employment at the GL. I witnessed supervisors trying to instil in young people

the social skills they required for the workplace. As Greg described - “they learn their please and thankyou’s and don’t litter and don’t spit and its simple little things”. In Telville, the supervisor took the young people to job fairs and open days, so that they could observe how he interacted with adult professionals, training services and employers, and practice speaking to such individuals themselves. Young people described improving their social skills and gained confidence from their interactions whilst working at the GL. As evidenced by this statement from Scott –

“Yeah the [GL] has definitely helped me cos like, I’m quite, I wouldn’t say I’m socially awkward but sometimes, like, if I don’t know someone I wouldn’t even try and make conversation with them. [GL] is like, because like they took weh to different sites where like you have to speak to different people of different trades, its built my confidence to be able to just go up to someone and start a conversation”.

Furthermore, in Telville, supervisors tried to ensure that young people learned the ‘language’ that they would need to attain work within the building trade. For example, supervisors made an effort to teach young employees the correct terms for the work that they were doing, such as ‘groundwork’, ‘vegetation management’, ‘site maintenance’ etc. Moreover, one of the supervisors, Greg, taught young people the names of the flora and fauna they observed when they were working in rural locations. Indeed, on days where they had no work to do, he would take them on educational excursions into rural areas to learn more about nature. As Julie described –

“the majority of people haven’t been to school so therefore you learn something new everyday. Since like the three of us have been working with Greg like he’s told weh all about willow trees, like before he told weh - that conker tree there - he told weh that not much conkers have formed cos there’s not enough pollen for the bees to be attracted. So yeah you learn something new cos like the majority of the people haven’t been to school”

For a young person who has been disengaged from learning up until this point, feeling that they have gained even a small amount of knowledge might hold huge significance in their lives.

5.2.3. Provides opportunities for ‘personal achievement’

As reported by Bailey and Madden (2015) with adult employees, many GL attendees found meaning in being able to step back and survey what they had achieved in the working day. As supervisor Greg described, “for a lot of our young people they’ve got to see the completed product at the end of the day, because if they don’t they think it’s meaningless”. The more ‘visual’ the achievement the more likely young people were to feel that their work was meaningful. For example, I observed young people admiring the bench they had built and counting how many bags of leaves they had collected that day. As this excerpt from my interview with Scott demonstrates -

Me: “What sort of job would you like to do in the future?”

Scott: “Something hands on and manual, something like a builder, something where you can step back and you can look at like... the thing is with an electrician, like my Dad, all the work is hidden, like behind walls and that, I like being able to look back and think – I built that. Like it’s just seeing something that you’ve done. Like it’s an achievement – makes us feel worthwhile actually getting shit done. So some sort of trade - a builder or a joiner - I’d like something like that.”

Young offenders - like adult professionals - found that achievement at work gave them a sense of self-efficacy and worthiness. Such feelings can evoke experiences of meaningfulness (Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski, 2010).

The nature of the outdoor physical work undertaken at the GL meant that many tasks could be completed within a few days and they had quite noticeable differences once finished. Supervisors were also responsible for young people feeling a sense of achievement from their employment. Supervisors routinely took ‘before’ and ‘after’ photographs of the work young people had done to show them the difference they had made in their work. Supervisors also deliberately organised young people’s working days so that there were opportunities for achievement. They would divide longer work tasks - that might take a week or more - into several achievable sections, so that at the end of each day young people could observe what they had accomplished.

I observed all supervisors routinely giving young people praise, even for the completion of small tasks. This was particularly meaningful to participants, as illustrated by Greg’s comments -

“I try to give the lads a lot of praise, most of them thrive off of praise. Some of them have never been praised. You see they get embarrassed. And it’s like what’s the matter? You’ve done a good job here and whatever, thank you very much for the day. We got through all this today, and we thought we weren’t going to. And its... we’ve had a couple like that. They do like the praise but they cannot handle it because probably they’ve never been praised before, more often than not they are told they’re a waste of space”

Accordingly, whilst young people were similar to the adult professionals surveyed in the meaningful employment literature, in the sense that they also valued work that gave opportunities for personal achievement, this was especially meaningful to this group. The participants of this research are a group of individuals who are used to receiving mainly negative feedback from others regarding themselves and their abilities - such as family members, schoolteachers, criminal justice workers, social workers etc. Engaging in work that allowed others to see that young person’s capabilities was therefore meaningful to young people.

5.2.4. Provides ‘interesting’ work tasks

In contrast to the research conducted with adult professionals (Fried and Ferris, 1987; Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Steger, Dik and Duffy, 2012; Veltman, 2015; Allan, Duffy and Collison, 2017), I did not perceive that ‘interesting work’ was amongst participants’ criteria for meaningful employment. Indeed, young people rated work that was interesting the least important of the typology of meaningful employment practices drawn from existing literature (see table 5.2 in section 5.2.9). As Dale described, when I asked him if having an interesting job was something he desired in the future – “I don’t think it’s really important is it? Work is... just needs to be done. Get your pay, that’s it”. Likewise, Alexander stated – “yeah, great if you can get something interesting, but it’s not important, you can still do the work and you can’t live off nowt”.

When I explored the reasons for this, I found that some young people had no expectations for their future work to be interesting and therefore could not anticipate this as a source of meaning. For example, a supervisor explained –

“The money is really important. Getting an interesting job is a bonus. I’ve asked young people, if I had a magic wand, what job would they want to do? And they say something and I say to get that, you’d have to go back to school, do your English and your Maths. And then you might have to go to University. It’s all these obstacles in front of what they want”.

This supports the findings of Johnson (2002) who reports that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds will reassess the desirability of job rewards, such as inspiring interest, that are less accessible.

I did not attribute this apathy towards obtaining interesting employment to the nature of young people’s work at the GL. Whilst litter-picking jobs were resoundingly unpopular with participants, they were no more mundane than some of the other work tasks, and therefore I accredited this to litter-picking not meeting young people’s desires for ‘adult work’. Young people reported visiting different sites and doing varied work made their time at the GL interesting. Therefore, young people did find their employment to be of interest, and necessarily experienced the positive emotions that accompany this (King et al., 2006). Yet their pessimistic appraisal of their ability to obtain employment that produced these positive emotions prevented this becoming a source of meaning in their lives.

5.2.5. Allows for 'self-determination' when working

The value of autonomous working divided young people's opinions. As found with interesting work, some participants thought it unlikely that they would attain work where they were not under the control of others and deliberately reassessed the desirability of such organisational practices. As Dean stated when I asked him if he thought being in control of his working day was important - "Don't you only get that when you're higher up? Not that bothered to be honest". Furthermore, Alexander affirmed - "I'd say that's not very important. I'm ok with being told to do this and do that". On the other hand, some youths expressed that it would be important to them in future employment to be able to take initiative in their work and not have all decisions made by their superiors. Indeed, several young people described that it would be their 'dream' to be self-employed in the future, so that they could be their own boss and set their own hours. The unlikelihood of this did not seem to lead these young people to reconsider its importance, as they did with finding interesting work.

Young people considered self-determined work to be work of adult status. Indeed, employees expressed that working at the GL felt more like 'real work' to them when the supervisor let them choose how to complete work tasks. The desire to be treated as an adult worker was evident in my conversation with Julie about the supervisor -

Julie: "He treats us like an adult. He lets us get on with our work like how we want to do it, he's not on us all the time, I couldn't stand that. It's not like the rest of the YOT you know, they're always like do this don't do that. Greg's different..."

Me: "And do you prefer to be treated as an adult?"

Julie: "Definitely. Definitely. Cos obviously like we are... like I've got me own tenancy and stuff. And when Greg's like that it makes me not want to mess stuff up again, he's got respect for us so we are going to have respect for him".

Julie described how having autonomy at work resonated with her need to be considered an adult. Therefore, whilst psychologists Ryan and Deci (2000) purport that all human beings are naturally predisposed to seek autonomy in their lives, for adolescent offenders - who desire 'adult status' at a time when they are largely treated as a child by society (Moffit, 1993) - this was particularly significant. Therefore, employment that allowed for self-determination when working was meaningful to these participants.

Supervisors at the GL were mainly fixed upon managing the risks of young people's work. Employees were usually supervised at all times and were given precise instructions how to complete each task. However, as the GL work programme involves young people with complex needs working in environments with numerous hazards and sometimes using

potentially dangerous tools, it is understandable that the priority would be risk management, rather than allowing young people freedom to find autonomy and take initiative in their work. Yet supervisors also explained that as the employees move further through their six-month placement, and behaviour and attitudes towards working improve, they try to give them more responsibility. They encourage young people to work independently, to decide themselves how to complete their work, instead of relying upon the supervisor to direct their actions. Occasionally they were permitted to do pieces of work unsupervised. As illustrated in Julie's quote above, young people expressed their appreciation of this freedom and the trust given by supervisors. Therefore, there was scope for young people to feel a sense of self-determination and autonomy during their working day at the GL.

5.2.6. Promotes 'social bonds'

Some young people described 'working with people they liked' as being very important for their future employment. They explained that it was imperative to be able to have 'banter' with their workmates. A workplace where co-workers were too 'serious' or 'aloof' would be frustrating and tedious. As Glenn detailed –

“Like you can't go to work and you can't be like all professional 24/7. Like obviously you've got to be able to have a bit of banter. Got to be able to have a laugh and shit like that”.

The particular organisation of the GL enterprise made the formation of social bonds between employees very likely. At the GL, young people worked in a small group (of between two and five members) every weekday for six months. The youths selected for the GL were close in age, of a similar socio-economic background and shared a comparable history of involvement in the youth justice system. Most of the outdoor work young people were involved in required them to work as a team. For example, in their environmental work, young people worked together to remove heavy or large objects from streams. Furthermore, in their heritage and commercial construction work, young people often formed an 'assembly line' to ensure efficient and co-ordinated working and for successful completion of tasks. Therefore, the employees' reliance on each other to fulfil the requirements of the work at the GL made recurrent social interactions necessary.

Consequently, most participants became friends, rather than merely work associates and some would socialise after work. A few also kept in touch after their placement ended. They expressed having shared interests - such as computer games, alcohol, cannabis, football, clothes, cars and music. As numerous researchers have discovered with adult professionals (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Bechky, 2003; May, Gilson and Harter, 2004;

Grant, Dutton and Rosso, 2008) young offenders found meaning in their bonds with their co-workers. For example, Scott describes -

“The best thing about the [GL] in my opinion is that it is a small group so you get to know the people you are working with if you know what I mean? You get to know them for who they are rather than just like... working with a lot of people but not even knowing their names. I worked with Dean, Ross and Alexander like for... I'd say we are quite close now, we're quite close. For four months now, they've been the people I've worked with. It's made us a lot closer working with the same people.”

Several other young people stated that the best thing about the GL was “the banter with the other lads” or the “positive energy of the group”. Some employees formed particularly close relationships, as described by Joseph –

“William he is like really easy to get on with and understanding and shit... you can just speak to him about 'owt. Like you can just go to him and you can say anything because he is not the kind of person that would cut you off, he'll sit there and he'll talk”

In most cohorts, I observed the ‘close-knit’ social dynamics depicted by Pratt and Ashforth (2003) as important for deriving meaning from work. Such a working environment allowed young people to experience ‘relatedness’, which Ryan and Deci (2002) describe as a fundamental human need.

Social bonds existed not only between the GL employees, but also between the employees and their supervisor. At the GL, young people worked with a single supervisor, who was predominantly the same individual throughout the six-month period. Supervisors at the GL found that humour and a degree of permissiveness of some minor deviant behaviours allowed them to win the respect of young people and made engaging them in the work tasks easier. Consequently, some young people referred to the supervisor as their “pal” because of the “banter” he brought to the group. Alexander described the Telville supervisor - “He's mad, he's ace. I like him me, we all do. He's a good laugh...we can joke around with him like you would with mates”. In addition, Julie explained that the Landington supervisor had - “good crack, we'd love to get him stoned”. Supervisors reiterated these thoughts, as Ross states –

“because of the almost camaraderie they build with the other young people, and with me.. it's serious and its work, but it's also good fun... there comes a point where they almost get that fear of missing out, where they don't want to miss a day because they might miss something fun or we might have a really good laugh.”

For most, supervisors were somewhere in-between a friend and a mentor (or even father figure) for them. Supervisors often assisted young people with issues they had outside their work at the GL. I observed supervisors helping young people to find extra-curricular activities, secure a tenancy, travel to job interviews, find and attend relevant support

programmes and deal with negative peer pressure. This extra support was particularly meaningful to some participants because they had few others in their lives that cared for their well-being. As Julie stated –

“Like within the six month Greg’s done a lot for me... he’s helped out a lot. And like I am really grateful for that. He’s helped out a lot with my driving... he’s helped with like my tenancy and stuff and he’s like when you move I’ll give you a hand to like transport your things and that’s lovely.”

Indeed, in a few instances young people mistakenly believed that I was there to ‘check up’ on their supervisors, and were keen to defend him to me in interviews. This loyalty demonstrates the bonds generated with supervisors. Thus, this is another way in which young people experienced relatedness at the GL.

5.2.7. Provides an ‘adequate income’

Although the typology in chapter 2 considers job stability and income together as extrinsic sources of meaningfulness in work, my participants’ reasons for finding meaning from work remuneration and secure employment were distinct, and therefore I consider these separately.

When reviewing the existing meaningful employment literature in section 2.3.1, I established that whilst low pay can restrict the ability of employees to find meaning in their work, the economic rewards from working are not usually considered sources of meaning in themselves. This consensus does not apply to the participants of this study. Young people found inherent value in the income they received from working.

Earning money through working gave young people an adult ‘provider’ status, which was something that many valued considerably in their lives, and hence its fulfilment produced feelings of meaningfulness. Some young males expressed being able to afford to take their girlfriends to nice places and one young man used his earnings from the GL to buy presents for his siblings. Being a ‘provider’, even if only for oneself, was valued by females too¹⁰, as Julie described –

“Like it’s the fact of like ... you’re working for your own money and it’s like all my family’s been on the dole and its ladgeful¹¹. So it’s the fact that I’m working for my money, I’m providing for me-self and me flat. Like before I had started and stuff I was just like waiting for the money off my social worker I felt like a proper tramp. Now I can hold me head up because I’m providing for me-self”

¹⁰ However, the sample of females was so small (n=1) that I could not determine whether being a provider was equally meaningful to both young male and female offenders. Future research could explore this further.

¹¹ Slang for embarrassing/shameful

Thus, it was not simply acquiring money that was meaningful to these young people, it was important that they ‘earned’ their pay. As Scott stated –

“you don’t appreciate money as much as when you earn it; you feel better spending money you’ve earned. Rather than money that’s just free to you”.

Likewise, Alexander expressed –

“I don’t think it’s fair that some people have to work for their money and some people get it handed out. I’d get off my arse and earn it me, not just take what’s given”.

This was the mindset of many of the young people at the GL, who described receiving benefits as shameful. Indeed, some expressed their contempt at those who received job-seekers allowance, or ‘dolewallers’ as they labelled them. Not one of the young people I interviewed described wanting to be dependent on state benefits in the future, confirming MacDonald, Shildrick and Furlong’s (2013) findings about the myth of the working-class culture of welfare dependency and Jensen and Tyler’s (2015) assertions regarding the emergence of an anti-welfare commonsense.

What level of remuneration did young people need for their work to be meaningful? My findings suggested that participants only required sufficient pay to meet their basic needs. Despite the inherent meaning young people found in earning their own money, few expressed a desire to be wealthy. Perhaps, as with attaining self-determined and interesting work, they felt this would be unlikely. As Julie explained –

“People always bang on about having shit loads of money and that but I just want to be average me like I just want to have an average income and not like struggling and that and just to have enough to provide for on a daily basis. It’d be nice to have like no worries one day. That’s all I want really”

Almost all participants, when I asked them what they wanted most in the future, mentioned having sufficient money. Furthermore, when asked the ‘lottery question’, many young people mentioned that they would reinvest their winnings in various ways to guarantee their financial security for the future. This is despite the fact that I had specified to young people when asking the question that they would have sufficient money for the rest of their lives (the purpose of the question being to establish whether they still valued working when it was not a financial necessity). Thus, even when hypothetically winning the lottery, young people were still concerned about having insufficient money. Considering these participants’ regular exposure to poverty and the harms this causes, it was unsurprising that one of their ‘ultimate concerns’ was to achieve financial security. Employment that aligns with this goal would therefore be meaningful to young people.

Can working at the GL, which only pays minimum wage, consequently be meaningful to young people? Most participants were living with parents or other relatives whilst engaged in this employment programme. For young people with few living costs to pay, earning minimum wage for 30 hours a week amounted to them having a considerable disposable income. There were also few other legitimate means by which they could ascertain this. As most were under-18, they were not eligible for welfare support, and as described above, most young people were opposed to receiving state benefits. Moreover, their distance from the labour market was considerable. Having a criminal record and few qualifications presents a serious barrier to gaining stable employment (Winlow and Hall, 2009; Standing, 2011; House of Commons Justice Committee, 2017).

5.2.8. Provides 'stable' work

Existing meaningful employment literature tends to understate the importance of job security as a source of meaning in employment. Instead, it puts emphasis on intrinsic sources of meaning in work. This may be because of the populations this research has been based upon, primarily adult professionals, for whom job stability and guarantee of income may not be such a concern. I found that for young people with a history of offending, job stability was what they desired above all else in future employment; table 5.2 in section 5.2.9 illustrates this. Indeed, many young people expressed that they would be happy to do any form of employment in the future, if only they could obtain something that would 'last'. As Max described –

“All I want is a job really. One that's full-time. I couldn't deal with having like a zero hours contract and getting up in the morning not knowing that I have a job to go to. I want something that's reliable”

Such were young people's longing for stable employment that several said they would have been happy to continue working at the GL indefinitely if that had been possible, for example Scott said he would be “happy to stay on it 'til I retired”. A few young people even got back in touch with the GL after they had completed their placement, hoping for work.

One of the reasons steady employment was so important to the participants was because of the turbulent nature of many of their lives; stable work would give them constancy. A surprising finding was that these young people, all 18-years-old or under at the time of commencing the GL, had often engaged in numerous training schemes, college courses and paid jobs prior to starting at the GL. See table 5.1 illustrating this.

Table 5.1 Previous activities of Green Light employees

		Age whilst employed by GL	Previous Employment	Outcome	Previous training	Outcome
Landington Cohort 1	Julie	17	Carer Waitress	temporary temporary	Nursery Nurse apprenticeship	dropped out
	Sam	18/19			Employment support course Painting and decorating course Car mechanics course	temporary dropped out dropped out
	Gary	17			Construction course	asked to leave
	Tim	16/17			Post-16 training course	dropped out
Landington Cohort 2	John	17/18			Bricklaying course	dropped out
	Kevin	17/18	Landscape gardener Fencer	temporary temporary		
	Glenn	18	Administrator Waiter Factory operative	dropped out temporary temporary	Princes Trust training course Northern Citizen Service Training programme Rathbones training programme Roofers apprenticeship	dropped out temporary temporary dropped out
Landington Cohort 3	Kyle	17/18			Bricklaying course Rathbones training programme Mechanics course	dropped out dropped out asked to leave
	Dale	17	Painter/decorator	asked to leave		

Table 5.1. Previous activities of Green Light employees (continued)

		Age whilst employed by GL	Previous Employment	Outcome	Previous training	Outcome
Telville Cohort 1	William	17			Engineering course	asked to leave
	Joseph	18	Call centre worker	dropped out	Bricklaying course	temporary
	Darrell	17			Building course	dropped out
Telville Cohort 2	Adam	16	[unknown]		[unknown]	
	Rory	17	[unknown]		[unknown]	
Telville Cohort 3	Scott	16/17	Construction worker Electrician (work experience) Mechanic (work experience)	temporary temporary temporary		
	Alexander	16/17			Painting and decorating course	dropped out
	Dean	17			Sports Fitness course	asked to leave
	Ian	18			Bricklaying course	dropped out
Wheatburgh Cohort 1	Max	17			Post-16 training course	asked to leave
	Harry	17/18	[unknown]		[unknown]	
	George	18			Bricklaying course Art and Design course	asked to leave dropped out
	Stephen	17	Roofer	temporary		
	Jay	17/18	Scaffolder Conservatory installer	temporary dropped out		

For some young people their chaotic lifestyles and offending behaviours meant that they found it difficult to commit to these. Moreover, on some occasions they were asked to leave because of disciplinary issues. However, in many instances it was not that young people could not commit to the employment or training programme, but rather these opportunities were only temporary ones. Securing something permanent was extremely difficult. These findings exemplify the ‘chronic churning’ that Russell, Simmons and Thompson (2011) describe as characterising the experiences of those who leave school early. Participants described requiring a single purpose that they could work towards. Thus, steady employment would be inherently meaningful to young people, because it would give a sense of coherence to their lives (part of King, Heintzelman and Ward’s (2016) definition of meaningfulness). This is different to the findings with adult professionals, for whom stability in employment was merely a condition for them to find further meaning in their work (Ayers et al., 2008; Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009).

Another reason why young people desired stable employment was their need to occupy their time – an unexpected yet central theme in discussions regarding meaningful employment. Some of the responses to the ‘lottery question’ illustrated this. Of those participants who said that they would still want to work if no longer financially necessary, over 60% said that this was because they thought their lives would be empty without work. When young people had prolonged periods of being NEET, which - as highlighted above - were common for this group as they found themselves unable to find a stable career path, they described ‘lying in bed all day’, ‘sitting around the house doing nowt’ and ‘hanging on the streets with my mates, bored’. I considered that this might be due to their lack of exposure to leisure activities. The poverty that these young people and their families often faced meant that they rarely were able to afford to partake in many recreational pursuits. MacDonald and Shildrick (2007) similarly found that materially deprived young people had such limited leisure lives that one of their main concerns was ‘filling time’. Thus when young people were not engaged in training/employment/education their time felt particularly empty; they could not perceive the availability of other sources of meaning in their lives. Participants were desperate to avoid this feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness.

As highlighted in chapter 4, many of the participants in this study had experienced traumatic events in their lives. Keeping occupied through working was therefore also important to young people as a means of distracting themselves from dwelling on these negative events. Julie’s statement described this –

“when I wasn’t working I was just like going radge¹² and stuff and I just need to keep occupied and stuff cos of the bairn and that’s got leukaemia and I was only like getting one contact a week and then his chemo on a Tuesday and it was just like doing my head in and I was just like going radge and that. So I just needed something to keep me occupied”

Similarly, Alexander depicted being at home all day as ‘driving him insane’ and Dean stated working kept his ‘mind off stuff’. Thus, because keeping occupied was particularly valued by young people, stable employment that fulfilled this desire was inherently meaningful (Steger, Dik and Duffy, 2012). In the existing research on meaningful employment, adult professionals did not refer to the ability of work to occupy their time and mind as a source of meaning. This is understandable because – as we can see above – the reasons young people give for needing to keep busy are very particular to their social position as youths from chaotic and impoverished backgrounds.

Many young people said a benefit of engaging with the GL programme was knowing when they woke up in the morning that they had something to fill that day. Indeed, for around a quarter of participants the best thing about the GL was that it was ‘something to do’ or it ‘passed the time’. Yet the GL only provided six months work; did this prevent it being meaningful employment? The aim of this social enterprise when it was founded was to provide participants with a realistic opportunity of securing permanent employment. It was intended that this would occur through each young person who completed the placement being offered a ‘next step’ job with one of the GL’s partner organisations. Therefore, even though the young people’s employment with the GL might be limited to six months, this may not necessarily constrain its meaning if there is an understanding that stable employment *will* be obtained through working at this scheme. However, over time, there appears to be fewer opportunities available for young people. Several supervisors questioned the motives of partner organisations, stating that they appeared to be eager to publicise that they were sponsoring this social enterprise, but less keen to offer young people full-time work at the end of their employment. Despite this, supervisors and YOT workers made an effort to ensure young people were not abandoned after their employment at the GL ended. Indeed, in many cases, participants were able to obtain employment/training following their time at the GL – see table 7.11 in chapter 7. Unfortunately, most of these opportunities were still unstable; some young people had been through three or four jobs in the six-month follow up I conducted.

¹² Slang for ‘crazy’

The challenge for the GL, regardless of the extent of its aftercare provision, is that it cannot overcome the structural barriers in a neoliberal society that inhibit ‘stable’ work for young people. A number of scholars have identified that, for particular social groups, there is no longer any guarantee of lasting employment. For example, Crutchfield (2014) explains that following the demise of the manufacturing industry in Western societies, there emerged a division between primary sector and secondary sector jobs. Primary sector jobs are characterised by good pay, job security and opportunities for promotion. Examples would be high-status professions, such as law or medicine, but also traditional blue-collar occupations. Secondary sector jobs are low-paid, unstable and have few opportunities for advancement. Examples include unskilled and nonunionised construction workers, retail workers and call centre workers. The young people in this study have primarily progressed from the GL to work in these types of jobs – see table 7.11, chapter 7.

Why are participants destined to be secondary workers? Standing (2011) describes those who work in the secondary sector as an emerging social class he terms the ‘precariat’ because of their precarious existence in a stream of temporary jobs. Standing explains that one of the main groups that make up the precariat are young people who leave school early to enter into low-paying jobs interspersed with spells of unemployment. He also ascertains that those that have been ‘criminalised’ make up the precariat because of the barriers they face to normal participation in society due to their criminal record. Due to their lack of qualifications and offending histories, the participants in this study are located within this social group.

This scholarship demonstrates that due to the structural conditions of contemporary labour markets, unless the GL were to offer permanent employment itself, there is little it can do to provide stability in employment for young people. Winlow, Hall and Treadwell (2017) state that this perilous situation is caused by the current global political economy and only a change to a more viable economic model that rejuvenates deprived areas and guarantees stable work for all will be able to address these issues. Therefore, whilst the transience of employment at the GL may make it less meaningful, the depressing reality may be that because of their social class, the likelihood of participants obtaining secure employment is slim. Indeed, Shildrick and MacDonald (2007), in their longitudinal study with youths from deprived, high-crime areas in northern England, found that participants’ work histories from school-leaving until their late-20s consisted of low quality training/educational programmes, unstable employment and periods of unemployment. Working in such insecure conditions, it will necessarily be more difficult to generate an occupational identity and thus formulate a firm answer to ‘why am I here?’

5.2.9. Overall

GL employees found meaning in many of the same organisational practices as adult professionals. Table 5.2 below demonstrates the importance young people gave to the organisational practices specified in existing literature.

Table 5.2 Importance of existing typology of meaningful organisational practices to participants

Organisational practice	Average score (out of 5)
Provides 'stable' work	4.86
Provides an 'adequate income'	4.67
Provides opportunities for 'learning'	4.21
Promotes 'social bonds'	4.21
Provides opportunities for 'personal achievement'	4.14
Allows for 'self-determination' when working	4.14
Provides work which 'does good'	4.07
Provides 'interesting' work tasks	2.67

However, often young people experienced meaning from these organisational practices for different reasons than adult professionals. These reasons were specific to their social position. As adolescents desiring autonomy, employment that felt the equivalent of that carried out by adults was meaningful to young people. This was work with opportunities for skill development, that allowed self-determined working and that provided an adequate income. Moreover, in contrast to the findings with adults, young people also found job stability and income to be sources of meaning in themselves, not just preconditions for finding meaning elsewhere in employment. Again, this reflects their social position; young people desired job security to find a sense of coherence in their often chaotic lives. Young people found meaning in the remuneration from employment because of their regular exposure to poverty and the harm it causes.

5.3. Other organisational practices

There were organisational practices not specified in the existing literature on meaningful employment that young people described giving their work meaning. This section considers these.

5.3.1. Provides 'manual' work

Many participants expressed that they preferred practical, manual work. For example, Scott stated that –

“I’m more of a hands-on manual person, that’s how I learn, I can’t learn by reading off a board, so I would prefer this to college. It’s practical, I learn hands-on”

Young males in particular found the physically demanding work at the GL meaningful. Several employees took pride in telling me that they were a “good grafter” and would emphasise the occasions they had done “back-breaking” work. It was rare that employees would object to work tasks being too physically demanding. As a supervisor stated –

“It’s the more manual work which generally suits all of our young people. Yeah, it’s the heavy, digging mud, rather than the gardening. I mean they engage with the gardening, they enjoy it, but I think they enjoy more getting their hands dirty.”

I believe the reason young men found meaning in this work was that it fitted with traditional hegemonic male working-class ideals of masculinity, such as ‘toughness’ and ‘strength’ and ‘machismo’ (Connell, 1995; Ghaill, 1996; McDowell, 2003; Slutskaia et al., 2016). The young employees esteemed these values, due to the environments in which they resided. A supervisor explained to me that growing up on the estates that these young people had meant they “had to be tough or they were finished”. Therefore, when young people felt their work allowed them to achieve this, it had inherent meaning. It gave their lives a greater sense of coherence (Steger, Dik and Duffy, 2012).

Some young men also believed that ‘hard graft’ was what adult males did and therefore again this made work meaningful for them as it fulfilled their aspirations to attain ‘adult’ status. However, employees did not feel that all manual work was straightforwardly the equivalent of adult work. It was important to my participants that they used the correct equipment. For example, a few youths in Telville expressed concerns that the adult builders on the construction site would mock them for using brushes to do their painting. Similarly, in Wheatburgh, young people lamented the fact that they used hedge trimmers and strimmers without metal blades. In some instances, health and safety requirements or the limited budget of this social enterprise meant young people had to do work the ‘long way’ – which tended to involve more manual labouring - rather than using more sophisticated equipment. Yet, because it was important to participants to feel that they were the equivalent of adult labourers when working at the GL, this particular ‘hard graft’ lacked meaning. Therefore, this is an important caveat to the assertion that young people found meaning in manual work.

5.3.2. Provides ‘outdoor’ work

A final unexpected theme that appeared in many young people’s discourses regarding meaningful employment was the importance they placed upon the setting of their work. Some work tasks at the GL took place in rural areas. Young people valued working in this setting; they took an interest in the plants and animals that they observed and described

enjoying the fresh air and peace of immersion in nature. In particular for this population, working in rural areas meant that they were guaranteed not to be observed working by their peers. This was important because on a few occasions when working in urban areas they had to endure the taunts of peers and even threats from rival gang members. I observed that participants were more relaxed in rural areas. Their behaviour was more childlike: escaping the city meant that young people did not need to act 'hard' or 'streetwise'; they could act their age. It was a safe space for them.

However whilst young people enjoyed the benefits of working in rural locations, what invoked feelings of meaningfulness was generally working outdoors. A few participants described previous employment where they were indoors all day as frustrating and stressful. For example, Glenn disclosed –

“Done some, I don’t know what you’d call it... admin. Admin jobs. I didn’t like it, me brothers just offered me a job there for £260 a week, but it would be just sitting down at the computer answering phones, I said I couldn’t dey it. I need to do outdoors work or I couldn’t work... I just couldn’t handle that... I hate sitting in. I don’t like it”

Another young person compared working indoors to his experiences in prison. The distress of incarceration at a young age meant that it was impossible for him to envisage himself being confined to working indoors. Sixty percent of the young participants of this study suffered from mental health problems (a disproportionate number, confirming the findings of Walsh et al. (2011) that the mental health needs of young offenders are far greater than those of young people in general). Some had attempted suicide in the past. Supervisors described working at the GL helping young people with these issues. Young people themselves reported sleeping better, feeling calmer and being more focused since working outdoors. Naturally, improved mental wellbeing will allow one to feel that their life has greater value and therefore will engender meaning.

Being outdoors also appeared to be more conducive to learning for participants. Many young people expressed to me the difficulties they had experienced in trying to learn in a classroom setting. Some attributed their inability to complete educational courses to being unable to sit in a classroom all day. In modern society where it is almost impossible to gain stable employment without qualifications and where qualifications unavoidably require time to be spent in the classroom, this is a real obstacle. Young people stated that they learned better in the more relaxed environment at the GL, as opposed to the classroom with its confinement, strict rules and boundaries. This resonates with existing research, which indicates that there may be a cognitive advantage to spending time immersed in natural, rural areas or areas of urban ‘greenspace’ (Esteban, Harrison and Murphy, 2012; Atchley, Strayer and Atchley, 2012; Sproule et al., 2013). As identified in section 5.2.3., many young people

inherently valued opportunities to improve their knowledge/skills. Therefore, they also found meaning in working outdoors because it aided their desires to learn.

Nonetheless, I should acknowledge that at the time at which I was questioning young people about their criteria for meaningful employment, they were partaking in the GL scheme. This may have informed their ideas for meaningful employment. In particular, I could not determine whether the importance they attached to outdoor manual work was because this is what they were engaging in at the time. It may be that other young offenders would not specify that work would have to be manual and take place outdoors for it to be meaningful. As all my participants were attendees of the GL scheme, it may be up to future research to establish if the criteria for meaningful employment generated in this thesis also applies to other young offenders.

5.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have established a typology of organisational practices that constitutes meaningful employment for the majority of the youths in this study. This fulfils **research aim 1**. I constructed in chapter 2, a typology of meaningful organisational practices based on existing research, which has mainly been conducted with adult professionals. Young offenders' and adult professionals' conceptions of meaningful employment differed in certain respects. Not only were there organisational practices that were meaningful only to each particular group, but sometimes the two social groups found different sources of meaning in the same organisational practices. See table 5.3 illustrating this.

Table 5.3 Organisational practices that make work meaningful for adult professionals and young offenders

Organisational Practice	Source of meaning	
	Adult professionals	Young offenders
Provides work which 'does good'	Connection to wider purpose in society Positive reactions from others	Connection to wider purpose in society Positive reactions from others
Provides opportunities for 'learning'	Boosts feelings of worthiness and self-efficacy May reverberate with ultimate concerns	Fulfils wish to improve knowledge/skills Satisfies desire for adult status
Provides opportunities for 'personal achievement'	Boosts feelings of worthiness and self-efficacy Positive reactions from others	Boosts feelings of worthiness and self-efficacy Positive reactions from others
Provides 'interesting' work tasks	Experience of positive emotion	Not described as meaningful
Allows for 'self-determination' when working	Freedom to find meaning in work Satisfies desire for autonomy	Satisfies desire for adult status
Promotes 'social bonds'	Fulfils need for relatedness	Fulfils need for relatedness
Provides an 'adequate income'	Their absence can inhibit feelings of meaningfulness	Satisfies desire for adult status Aids objective to be financially secure
Provides 'stable' work		Allows for coherence in living
Provides 'manual' work	Not described as meaningful	Satisfies desire for adult status
Provides 'outdoor' work	Not described as meaningful	Improved mental wellbeing Fulfils wish to improve knowledge/skills

Despite my assertion that young offenders discovered different sources of meaning in their work compared to the research with adult professionals, essentially these could be summarised as the same two sources for both groups. As with adults, young people found 'psychological meaningfulness in work' to the extent that work aligned with their inherent values (Steger, Dik and Duffy, 2012). For youths these were a desire for adult status, to improve their knowledge/skills, to experience relatedness and to achieve financial security. Work that fulfilled these values was meaningful. Moreover, as with adults, young people found 'meaning making through work' where the work itself made a broader contribution in discovering meaning (Steger, Dik and Duffy, 2012). For youths, employment that connected them to a wider purpose, boosted feelings of worthiness and self-efficacy, and improved their mental wellbeing, allowed young people to find meaning in their lives. Essentially such work gave them a stronger answer to 'why am I here?'.

To fulfil **research aim 2**, it was necessary to establish the extent to which the GL scheme met young people's criteria for meaningful employment. The GL featured many organisational practices regarded as meaningful by young people. See table 5.4 illustrating this.

Table 5.4 Extent to which the Green Light fulfils participants' criteria for meaningful employment

Organisational Practice	Application to GL
Provides work which 'does good'	Provides work with visual benefits for the local community and wildlife
Provides opportunities for 'learning'	Young people develop construction, team-working, problem-solving and social skills
Provides opportunities for 'personal achievement'	Completion of small tasks on a regular basis Supervisors routinely praise young people
Allows for 'self-determination' when working	Young people trusted with more responsibility as they progress through the scheme
Promotes 'social bonds'	Involves working as a team in small groups
Provides an 'adequate income'	Young people paid minimum wage Potentially only source of legitimate income for this particular group
Provides 'stable' work	Work is only provided for six months
Provides 'manual' work	Work is all manual
Provides 'outdoor' work	Work is all outdoors

It should be noted that the GL supervisors played a significant role in ensuring participants found meaning from their employment. They helped young people find a sense of achievement from their work by giving them praise, they tried to teach young employees valuable skills despite the mundanity of most of the work, they gave young people opportunities to work autonomously and they became a valued support for participants. Potentially subconsciously, supervisors imbued young people's work with meaning. Therefore, when considering whether an organisation promotes meaningful employment, the importance of the motivations and values of its leaders and how they choose to shape the working environment should not be ignored.

Thus, because the GL largely fulfilled the majority of participants' criteria for meaningful work, I was able to use this social enterprise to investigate **research aims 3 and 4** of this project, which consider whether engaging in meaningful work impacts upon identity reconstruction and desistance. To do this it was necessary that the GL represented meaningful employment, at least to some participants. Chapters 6 and 7 consider the impact of engaging in meaningful employment upon identity reconstruction and desistance respectively.

6. Findings: The impact of meaningful employment upon identity

6.1. Introduction

The previous chapter established which employment practices the majority of young people felt gave meaning to their work. It also determined that the GL work programme met most of these criteria. This chapter seeks to discover whether engaging in meaningful work impacted upon participants' identities. The first part of this chapter considers the results of my narrative analysis. I deliberate whether young people's narratives altered during their participation at the GL, as an indication as to whether identities changed. I consider how young people tell stories of past events, how they present their current self and how their plans for their future develop during their six-month placement at the GL. The second part of this chapter contemplates whether any observable changes in identity can be attributed to participation in meaningful work at the GL. It seeks to clarify how exactly partaking in meaningful employment can influence young people's identities.

6.2. Did young people's identities change during their participation in the Green Light?

Scholars explain that our identity is based upon our own internal 'self-narrative' (Maruna, 2001; Dingfelder, 2011; Stevens, 2012; Presser, 2016). Consequently, in this section I analyse young people's self-narratives, which I attained from interviews conducted at various time intervals throughout their engagement in the GL programme. By examining interspaced accounts of young people's self-stories, I could decipher whether these accounts (and therefore identities) altered during young people's participation in employment. The findings from my analysis of these self-narratives were also supplemented by the findings from my own and supervisors' observations of young people and the reports of youth justice workers. These provided an additional source of information on the identity development of young people.

6.2.1. Past offending

Analysing how young people accounted for past events was very important, as scholars tell us that how we unify and describe the disparate events that have occurred in our pasts informs our sense of self (Maruna, 2001; Dingfelder, 2011; Stevens, 2012). In particular, when accounting for past criminal behaviours, there was a notable change over time in the way in which participants did this. At the 0-months interview, at the beginning of their GL placement, young people minimised their past involvement in offending. It was not just what they told in their narratives, but also how they told it, which demonstrated this intention to minimise. Some would not mention their criminal past, whilst others would use words other

than ‘committing crime’ to depict their past involvement in offending, such as “got in some bother” (George) “I used to go to the YOT” (Julie) “I got an, emm, YOT order” (John).

In the 3-months interview, the participants still used minimising techniques, for example, Dale described his past offending as - “I caused a bit of trouble”. However, young people also used techniques to deflect the focus from their involvement in the offence. Again, *how* they told their stories was very revealing. For example, Scott’s deliberate avoidance of ‘I’ in his account of past offending - “At YOT for fighting and affray. Then stole a car” and Glenn’s awkward phrasing - “I had a... got a... stand-off”. O’Connor (2000) highlights how passivising structures, such as not using ‘I’ and unusual phrasing can be used to remove focus from the storyteller’s agency. The way in which young people told the story was to detach themselves from the offence. Furthermore, one young person also explained that their past offending was justified; the victim deserved what they got.

By the 6-month interview, at the end of the GL placement, participants were using a range of techniques in their narratives to avoid taking responsibility for past offences, see table 6.1 displaying these.

Table 6.1 Avoidance techniques of youths when accounting for past offences

Avoidance technique	Examples
Minimising the crime	<p>It was seven year ago...if it had been that much of a great deal they wouldn't have allowed us to work in the nursery (Julie)</p> <p>Just a bit of daftness (John)</p> <p>We just went daft (Glenn)</p> <p>It was just common assault and affray, that's all it was really (Stephen)</p> <p>Just fighting with the bissies¹³ (Gary)</p> <p>It was just having a fight with someone outside me door. That's all it was (Jay)</p>
Detach self from offence	<p>I didn't mean to... was just messing about and it happened (Sam)</p> <p>I was like a different person when it happened (John)</p> <p>It just happened, I cannot really explain it to be honest with you (Kevin)</p> <p>I just gave in to my inner demons, I don't naw what came over us (Glenn)</p>
Crime was justified	<p>He deserved it, he's a nonce (Max)</p> <p>This kid said like he'd do something to me Grandma's house (Alexander)</p> <p>These two lads had touched me girlfriend (Alexander)</p>
Extenuating circumstances	<p>On the streets you get bored, so that's when you start doing stuff (Scott)</p> <p>There wasn't really nowt to do was there on the streets (George)</p> <p>I was trying to get the money for the drugs...you need to get the money from somewhere (John)</p> <p>I was just going out to get money really (Scott)</p> <p>Literally it was just for money (Dean)</p> <p>I needed to get a name for me-self, if you have a reputation no-one will mess with you (Stephen)</p>
Blame attached to another	<p>In the care home like the kids would make us lose our temper (Julie)</p> <p>Me mates were egging us on (Sam)</p> <p>I grew up with these lads, I had to just join in (Alexander)</p> <p>It's the people I hang about with that make us do stuff (Max)</p>

¹³ Slang for police

The categories in this table can be classified as ‘techniques of neutralisation’ even though they are slightly different from those identified by Sykes and Matza (1957). Maruna and Copes (2005) recognised that there are many more techniques than Sykes and Matza’s original five categories, and these themselves are to an extent indistinct and overlapping. Thus, if young people are employing techniques of neutralisation in their six-month narratives, what implications does this have for their identity? According to Sykes and Matza, offenders’ use techniques of neutralisation to justify and commit criminal acts. Therefore, this could suggest that more offending is imminent for participants. Indeed, scholars have purported that neutralisation use indicates that the offender is undertaking a process of desensitisation or ‘hardening’ towards criminal acts (Minor 1981; McCarthy and Stewart 1998). On the other hand, according to Maruna and Copes (2005), neutralisations allow offenders to avoid a negative self-image, as they still see themselves committed to the dominant normative system. Likewise, Harris (2011:2) reported that offenders use excuses for past behaviours in order to distance themselves from their former selves and ‘to re-create a possible self still worthy to be redeemed in the future’. That GL employees used such methods in telling the story of their criminal pasts, suggests that they wished to portray themselves as inherently pro-social; past offending had been for reasons out-with their control or had been minimal anyway.

The extent to which young people tried to minimise their past crimes is most apparent when their accounts are compared with the reports of youth justice workers, as recorded in their YOT records. For example, George described his most recent offence as “criminal damage, and what was it? Theft.” Whereas YOT records communicated that he had stolen goods worth several thousand pounds from a neighbour, some of which he damaged and some of which were never recovered. He had also vandalised a relative’s home and was found in possession of an illegal substance. Likewise, Stephen described his most recent offence - “It was just common assault and affray, that’s all it was really”. Whereas his YOT records stated that he had assaulted his mother several times, vandalised the family home, resisted arrest by a police officer and breached the order he was on. Interestingly, there was no mention of affray on any of Stephen’s records. He likely thought that portraying he had been fighting in public was more acceptable than admitting to abusing his mother.

Thus, part of the reason why young people might have altered their accounts of their past offending to this extent could be because (as discussed in chapter 4) they did not want to appear as a criminal to a listener (myself) who was overtly not an offender. However, I felt I had built a sufficient level of trust with some of the participants, that this should not have been an issue. This led me to conclude that for some at least, they were not

reconfiguring their pasts for my benefit, but for themselves. Moreover, that young people sought to minimise their past offending in the 0-months interview could suggest that even at the beginning of GL involvement, most young people did not have a strong criminal identity; instead, they wanted to hide/minimise their past behaviour. At 3-months, as well as minimise what had happened, GL employees started to detach themselves from past offences by removing the agency in their stories. Moreover, by the time young people were at the end of their employment with the GL (6-months) they were actively attaching the responsibility for past offences to external circumstances and other individuals. Essentially, during their involvement in the GL, participants increasingly sought to deny their responsibility for past offences and separate themselves from them. This consequently enhanced their pro-social self-concept.

6.2.2. Time to change

Some young people recognised a need to change their behaviours in the 0-months interviews. Although - as explained in the previous section - most sought to minimise their past offending at this point, a few were willing to acknowledge that they needed to change. For example, Alexander stated that he needed to “move forward with my life and be a better person” and John professed - “now I’m 18, everything has to change. It’s time to change. And I’m going to continue to keep changing”.

Participants made similar assertions in the 3-month interviews. By 6-months however, young people described themselves as already having changed. Many narratives at this point depicted the young person reaching a critical ‘turning point’ in the past, where they knew their lives would get much worse if they kept offending. Thus, for example, Joseph described the realisation that he was limiting his future work opportunities by offending –

“I was just realising that it stops you from doing a lot of shit, like being able to get a good job, like any job you want to do, like you’ve only got specific jobs you can do now, now that you’ve got a criminal record and shit. It just gets worse if you keep doing it”.

Furthermore, William depicted his relationship with his family reaching a critical point -

“I don’t know it were mainly like my family, when I were getting in shit and that they were like basically like pushing me out of the family and obviously I like started to realise and just thinking like if I don’t stop I’m going to like be on my own, so...”

Scott also described his turning point as being related to the impact upon his family -

“It were the night that I got locked up to be fair, I just, because the police showed my mum the video of the driving that I got done for. I were doing the wrong side of the road at like 90, through red lights and that. It were stupid. I could have killed someone easily. It were just, seeing my mum cry to the video that made me stop, I couldn’t put my mum through that again”.

However, most young people’s turning point was associated with imprisonment. Many of my participants realised that this was the only disposal left for them should they reoffend. For example, Max expressed –

“I’m out by the skin of my teeth to be honest. The judge was like: this is your final opportunity, the next time I see you, you are going to jail. So I knew I’ve gotta make a change”.

Moreover, some young people had previous experiences of youth detention centres and were afraid to return there or to progress to an adult prison. John’s speech illustrates this -

“I realised if I didn’t change myself I would end up in the jail again... I can’t dey it ya naw, jail was no good for me... And when you are in jail you over think stuff, do you naw what I mean? You regret everything you naw. You get out you realise, it’s no good in here. I’d rather be out there. It was after that that I knew”.

Other researchers examining the self-stories of youths similarly detail these ‘critical moments’ that young people retrospectively describe changing the course of their future (Johnston et al, 2000; Thomson et al, 2002; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2008). Furthermore, the finding that what triggered a change was young people’s realisation that life would get a lot worse if they did not stop offending, has found widespread support (Shover, 1983; Clarke and Cornish, 1985; Cusson and Pinsonneault, 1986; Cromwell et al., 1991; Leibrich, 1993). In particular, these findings complement Paternoster and Bushway’s (2009) ‘identity theory of desistance’, outlined in chapter 3 (section 3.3.2). This theory purports that what triggers a change in identity is the realisation on the part of the individual that their criminal offending is more costly than beneficial – there is a ‘crystallisation of discontent’ with offending.

That young people describe their ‘turning point’ arising prior to their engagement in the GL, could suggest that they agentially chose to change who they were long before participation in meaningful employment. However, I believe that participants’ hook for change was more closely associated with engagement in the GL, than these narratives would *prima facie* lead us to believe. It was only in the 6-month interviews (once they had been through the scheme) that young people began to describe themselves as having reached a turning point in the past and now being a changed person. Despite turning points having allegedly arisen before the GL, young people did not mention these in the 0-months interview. After experiencing employment participants appeared to be re-writing their pasts, to describe themselves as being on a path to change they did not see

themselves on before. Moreover, many young people acknowledged in their narratives that the GL had affected a change in them, which is explored in more detail in the next section.

6.2.3. Experience of the Green Light

In the 0-month interviews, young people describe their involvement in the GL as the YOT's doing; they depict their YOT caseworker 'putting' them on the GL. Participants do not express any agency in choosing to partake in this scheme and are very passive regarding their efforts in attaining a place on this employment programme. For example, Adam stated he "went for interview and just got it so thought I would do it", he does not acknowledge his success in securing this employment. Similarly, Stephen described "blagging" his way onto the scheme. Even when I asked young people how they felt being selected for the programme above other youths from the YOT, they would often not take any credit, for example Rory replied that he was not bothered about being chosen.

It was not until the 6-month interviews that the young people began to integrate their engagement in the GL into their story of change. They re-write their stories at this stage; they have no longer just been 'put' on the GL by the YOT, instead this was an agentic move to support their resolve to change. Some young people's stories in the 6-month interviews were similar to the narratives of the desisters in Maruna's (2001) study. Like Maruna's desisters, participants did not blame themselves for their involvement in crime (as illustrated in table 6.1). However, again like Maruna's desisters, they did take responsibility for overcoming their obstacles and moving away from offending (by choosing to get involved in the GL). In psychology, Brickman et al. (1982) term this the 'compensatory model' where individuals do not blame themselves for their problems, but hold themselves responsible for the solutions. Several scholars (Peterson, Seligman and Valliant, 1988; Taylor, 1989; Cohen, 2001) report that this way of thinking is beneficial for mental health and improves individual self-efficacy.

Whilst - as displayed in the previous section - several young people described in the 6-month interviews having reached a 'turning point' and made a decision to stop offending *before* engaging with the GL, they also stated that the GL helped support this choice. My interview with John illustrated this –

Me: "So why did you stop offending?"

John: "Because I didn't want to go back in the jail. I didn't want to be that person anymore. I want to be this person. I want to work."

Me: "So would you say you were already changed before you had started the [GL]?"

John: “Aye, I was on the right tracks. But then that’s [the GL] just led us. It’s like, I were on the track and then giving us this, has put us more on that track, know what a mean? This has just topped it all off, know what a mean? This is what you need. This is exactly what I needed, this here.”

Indeed, most participants recalled in their narratives both having chosen to change themselves and the GL having assisted their change.

Thus, young people’s narratives surrounding their involvement in the GL altered significantly over the duration of their placement. When they first began, young people were generally ambivalent about their involvement in the programme, and they did not associate it with their desires to change themselves and their offending behaviour. Essentially, it did not form a key part of their self-story. However as participants progressed through this employment programme, self-narratives altered, and the GL became integrated into their journey of change. Their involvement in the GL transformed to an agentic action, which aided their efforts to avoid reoffending.

This change of narrative was maintained when young people left the GL.¹⁴ In the one-year interviews, they still described participation in the GL as a good decision they had made, even those who had failed to progress into stable employment. Some acknowledged that their involvement in the programme had probably prevented them from slipping back into offending. Others said it had helped them into employment because they had gained confidence, had something to put on their CV or because they had acquired the CSCS card whilst working there. Indeed, John stated that –

“That’s what made us I think, if it wasn’t for the [GL] I don’t think I would have gotten into employment”.

This is despite the fact that he progressed to an insecure job as a night shift warehouse operative. Equally, however, some young people acknowledged that participation in the GL had not especially aided their future employment prospects, yet still described being grateful that they had participated in the programme. Russell, Simmons and Thompson (2011) evaluated the Entry to Employment (E2E) programme, and found similar findings. Their participants felt that by engaging with the programme, they were taking positive action to achieve longer-term goals, even if this was not occurring in reality. Thus, it appears in hindsight that it was what the GL represented to young people that they valued - their first steps towards realising a pro-social self - rather than the career-enhancing content of the programme.

¹⁴ However, inferences regarding young people’s narratives post-GL were largely based on the phone interviews I conducted with five participants only. Chapter 4 outlines the difficulties in regaining contact with young people post-GL.

6.2.4. Presentation of self

As highlighted earlier, in the 0-month interviews, some young people sought to minimise their past involvement in crime, whereas others acknowledged that they needed to change their behaviours. These narratives might suggest that the young participants wished to present themselves as a non-offender (or at least an offender who wants to change) even at the outset of GL involvement. However, as a whole, employees' narratives were insufficiently detailed in the first-week interviews to reliably infer their presentation of self. From early observations of young people, I witnessed that some presented mature behaviours from the beginning of their involvement with the GL, such as making small talk with supervisors in the van, responding politely to the inquiries of the public and completing work tasks without complaint. However, others seemed less concerned about presenting a mature or pro-social self. For example, on their first day, I overheard Joseph boasting about stealing cars, and I observed Darrell trying to leave the YOT through the window. Supervisors also confirmed that at the outset of their employment with the GL it could be difficult to control young people's behaviour. Research purports that our identity provides a direction for, and will be consistent with, our actions (Matsueda, 1992; Reynolds and Ceranic, 2007). Therefore, these demonstrations of anti-social behaviour at the beginning of young people's involvement with the GL might indicate an anti-social self-concept.

On the other hand, supervisors informed me (and I observed myself) that most young people did not wish to be referred to as offenders by others, even at the very beginning of their GL placement. Psychologists explain that one's identity consists of both a private self-image and a social identity that is bestowed upon the individual by others (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1956; Jenkins, 2004; Stevens, 2012). The way in which others 'label' the individual will have an effect upon their internal identity (Lemert, 1951, Becker, 1963). Thus, if participants did not wish others to consider them criminals, this would indicate that they themselves do not possess this self-image, or at least do not wish to anymore. Young people did not desire others to view them as deviant to protect their self-concept. This suggests that - at this early stage of GL involvement - most did not want to identify as criminals, even though they might be displaying anti-social behaviours.

In the 3-month interviews, young people's narratives were more detailed and some were inclined to present a pro-social self-image in their stories. Young people included examples of their good qualities; for example Scott stated – "I always try and be polite to people cos I always act like how I would want people to be to me". Furthermore, in several of the participants' narratives, they distinguished between themselves and those who they perceived to be more anti-social. Presser and Sandburg (2015) describe the importance of symbolic boundary drawing in narratives as a method for the storyteller to present a positive

self-image. For example, Jay was very keen to portray to me that he was not like the others in his work group –

Me: “Do you think you’ve got stuff in common with the other lads?”

Jay: “Hmm... nah. I’m different from them... I haven’t got anything in common with them. They just sit outside the bus station and get pissed... I would only drink in a bar in Telville or Wheatburgh or in the house, I’d never think let’s sit in this field and get pissed”

By three months, young people also drew physical boundaries between themselves and anti-social others. Supervisors described the young employees, when they were at the YOT, not mixing with other young offenders when they were having a cigarette break, but preferring to stand together with the GL youths.

However, some young people’s self-stories were contradictory in the 3-month interviews, where they presented both a pro-social and pro-criminal self within the same narrative. Presser and Sandburg (2015) explain that stories can contain multiple voices and disparate thoughts. This is apparent in Dale’s speech -

“I would like to help other people stop reoffending, but ... there would be some exceptions. You could help people that pinch cars and that, but you would never ever help like a burglar, because burglar is one of the worst things you could do. Burglar, sex offender and then people whose killing innocent people... But shoplifters and that I’d help shoplifters, because they are smarter, they pinch something that doesn’t affect Asda. You don’t pinch off your own people. Even rich people, I wouldn’t burgle. I’d rob the queen though, I’d steal her tiara”

Moreover, Alexander included several displays of a pro-social self-view within his 3-month narrative and even stated –

“I don’t like trouble, I’ll have trouble if it comes to me. If not, I’m not interested. Don’t want nowt to do with it”.

However, he also confessed in the same interview, when discussing the crime committed by a friend –

“I would have smashed his head in with a hammer I wouldn’t have just been hitting him seven times I would have been smashing his head in”.

Furthermore, Gary stated that he never wanted to go back to prison, in the same narrative as he described wanting to ‘deck’ someone for revenge. Therefore, I can summarise that by mid-way through their GL experience, young people’s presentation of self was conflicted, much as it was at the beginning of GL involvement. Most young people seemed intent on presenting a pro-social self to others, however there were times when a contradictory self-view also appeared to be present.

At the end of their placement with the GL, some young people again made efforts to present a pro-social self. In John's YOT records, it was reported that he had in the past terrorised his family with a knife and that his own mother was scared of him. Yet this was no longer the person John wanted to be, as he included examples of his altruism in his self-narratives; for example explaining that he no longer litters and that he was saving all his earnings for his unborn child, even if that meant going without himself. John also sought to distinguish between himself and other youths -

“Even if I wasn't working I'd be up for 9 o'clock. Out there. Looking for jobs anyway. Most teenagers, like... when I say this to most people they dinna believe us... you naw like most teenagers just sit about all day, never wanting to do anything... I want to get out there looking.”

As explained earlier, drawing symbolic boundaries between oneself and others is a key narrative technique to present a positive self-image (Presser and Sandburg, 2015).

As a whole, there were fewer contradictory narratives present in the 6-month interviews. However, there were exceptions, for example Max, who described his admiration for drug dealers - “they can earn 40, 50 grand a year” - and showed no remorse for the victim of his crimes –

“I would slap him again and again, every day I see him until the day I die I'd slap him with a bottle. He deserved it.”

Yet, in the same narrative including these sentiments, Max also described wanting to stop offending. Moreover, there were also discrepancies between what young people said in interviews and how they behaved towards the end of their placement. Julie stated that if she secured a decent income in the future, she would give money away to charity and to friends and family. Nonetheless, in the same interview she also confessed that she and another cohort member had configured the GL supervisor's tablet computer so that they were using its data, rather than their own (likely at a considerable cost to the social enterprise). These inconsistencies demonstrate the limitation of pro-social identities.

Thus, overall, during young people's placement at the GL, they sought to present a pro-social self to both myself and others. This identity was rarely a complete one – anti-social narratives and behaviours were still apparent even by the end of the employment. However, as employees progressed through the scheme, it became less contradictory. It is worth noting also that a number of young people made an effort early in their GL placement to present a pro-social self, and resented others viewing them as offenders, suggesting that they may not have had an inherent criminal identity before they began the GL.

6.2.5. Future plans

Analysing how young people described their future in their narratives was very important. Scholars explain that identity formation also consists of future goals; the ‘ideal self’ that one is working towards becoming at the moment and the ‘feared’ self that they are seeking to avoid (Vaughan, 2007; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009; Presser, 2010).

Employment

Young people expressed desiring legitimate employment in the future even in the 0-month interviews, before they had much experience of working at the GL. However, most were vague about which occupations they aspired to at this early stage. Nonetheless, securing a ‘full-time’ ‘reliable’ job was the ultimate ambition of most. This positive attitude to legitimate work might suggest that young people possessed an inherent pro-social identity from the beginning of GL involvement. Indeed, in the 0-month interviews, some participants’ ‘feared’ future self focussed on unemployment and financial hardship. For example, William described –

“I would want to be stable at a young age – and have a nice bit of money in the bank, house, car. Cos a lot of people don’t, you know what I mean? I see people at thirty and they’ve got no life, do you know what I mean? I want to be secure”.

These desires/fears for the future were also present in the 3-month narratives. At this point some young participants named specific occupations they desired, such as roofer, personal trainer and electrician. Furthermore, some young people described beginning to take pro-active steps to improve their chances of gaining future employment. For example, both John and Jay detailed their efforts to research possible employment opportunities for when they left the GL, because of their fears of being “stuck looking for work”. This was despite the fact that they were not to leave the GL for another three months. Likewise, Dean described taking steps towards attaining his driving licence, so that he could progress into a transportation job when he left the GL.

The 6-month interviews revealed that many young people had envisioned, and in some instances had taken action towards, the attainment of specific employment opportunities post-GL. It is worth noting that all of these were humble and realistic for this group with criminal records and limited education. This supports research by Trommsdorff and Lamm (1980: 271), who state that ‘the notion that the future orientation of delinquents is less realistic than that of non-delinquents seems especially false, a product of inadequate measurements and stereotyped theorising’. Indeed, affirming research by Shildrick and MacDonald (2007), young people aspired to traditional ‘working class’ occupations. In their narratives, young people described being hopeful about securing future employment, however many also gave expressions of a lack of confidence in this coming to fruition. For

example, Julie professed that the likelihood of her attaining work with the Environment Agency was only “50/50”. Similarly, Dale explained that whilst he knew that he wanted to do an apprenticeship post-GL, he had real fears that no one would give him the opportunity. Despite acknowledging that he had the right attitude and motivation, he could only say that his likelihood of future success was ‘probable’. Thus, for many, their future work plans became more concrete during their participation in the GL. Most young people were increasingly able to envision a pro-social ‘future self’ engaged in full-time employment and some had taken steps towards achieving this imagined self. However, even by six months into the scheme, young people’s confidence in their ability to realise this future self was limited.

At the one-year interviews¹⁵, despite many young people being employed in insecure ‘precariat’ jobs (see table 7.11, chapter 7), they still possessed the same imagined future self engaged in reliable, full-time employment. For example Jay expressed being “here there and everywhere trying to look for something more permanent, a career rather than a job”. Thus, young people’s pro-social identity appeared to have held, despite there potentially being little there to support it. If this would pertain into the future, I could not tell from my research design, with only a six-month follow-up. It must be acknowledged however that young people still lacked confidence in their ability to secure employment in the future. For example Scott obtained a full-time job as a labourer following his employment at the GL, yet when I asked about his future plans he stated “hopefully, touch wood, touch wood, one day I’ll be a qualified bricklayer”. Scott’s statement indicated that his imagined pro-social future-self was still in doubt.

Offending

Many participants’ self-stories revealed that their ideal ‘future self’ was also a non-offender, although the way in which these narratives were constructed showed that most were not confident that they would achieve this. In the six-month interviews, when I asked young people whether they thought they would reoffend in the future, their replies avoided expressing their full agency. For example, responses included – “not purposely” (Joseph), “hopefully not” (Sam, John, Kyle), “can’t say” (Darrell), “you never know what the future holds. I don’t want to, but there could be a reason in the future why I have to” (Glenn), “touch wood no” (Scott) “who knows?” (Jay). Presser and Sandburg (2015) highlight the importance in narrative analysis of the linguistics that can present someone as passive to

¹⁵ However, inferences regarding young people’s narratives post-GL were largely based on the phone interviews I conducted with five participants only. Chapter 4 outlines the difficulties in regaining contact with young people post-GL.

other forces. Young people may have felt that their future offending was to a certain extent out of their control. External pressures may have been such that they dared not express their full agency and declare themselves free from criminal involvement forever, in case it should ‘tempt fate’. Equally, participants may also have been deliberately attributing the responsibility for not reoffending onto some unknown deterministic force, because they did not want to take responsibility for this themselves when they knew their resolve might fail. Regardless of the reason why, young people could not guarantee that their future self would be a non-offender.

In their six-month narratives, some young people mentioned the possibility of being imprisoned as their most ‘feared’ future self. As John articulated –

“You could be sitting in a cell on a day like this and looking out your window. You cannot open your window you cannot do nothing. I don’t want to go back in the jail, if that’s me path then I swear to god just shoot me now, there’s no point going back there”.

Similarly, Glenn communicated in his narrative –

“If I don’t change myself I’m gonny end up in the doghouse. That’s not a place I want to be... I want to be outside working not inside in a cell. As long as I work hard I should be free from getting locked up all the time”.

Furthermore, Stephen’s sentiments reflected the others –

“Nay good really, nay good getting locked up is it? I’d rather be out here than inside. Nay good prison man, gotta keep meself away from that”.

Yet despite incarceration being their ‘worst case’ future self, young people could not guarantee that they would not reoffend in the future. Indeed, it was not until the 1-year interviews¹⁶ that a few young people could state with confidence that they would not offend again. However, others still were not sure, even if they had stayed crime-free for the six months post-GL. As Glenn stated - “I’d like to say nah, but I dinnah”.

It may appear that these findings greater resonate with the persisters in Maruna’s (2001) study than the desisters. Maruna found that persisters’ narratives contained ‘condemnation scripts’; they felt that it would be impossible to escape a life of deviance as they were victims of forces outside their control. In Maruna’s study, the desisters’ ‘future self’ involved being someone who gave back to society. They had generative goals, for example to help other offenders. Few of my participants expressed a desire to help others in the future or ‘save the next generation’. However, this does not necessarily mean that

¹⁶ However, inferences regarding young people’s narratives post-GL were largely based on the phone interviews I conducted with five participants only. Chapter 4 outlines the difficulties in regaining contact with young people post-GL.

participants failed to form the necessary identity for desistance. Healy and O'Donnell's (2008) study also found that narratives of younger offenders lacked generative themes – and attributed this to generativity being a stage that occurs in adulthood (Erikson, 1968). Furthermore, whilst young people lacked the ability to say with confidence that they would not reoffend, this was not comparable with the 'doomed to deviance' narratives of the persistent offenders in Maruna's study. Young people did not possess a strong sense of agency when discussing their future. However, this has been found in other research with youths (Munford and Sanders, 2015; Haigh, 2009; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). Indeed, Fitzpatrick, McGuire and Dickson (2015) reported - as in this study - that young offenders described idealised goal aspirations and made plans to achieve these but all expressed uncertainty about the likelihood of achieving this future self.

Overall, the future self that young people described in their narratives was a pro-social one; a non-offender engaged in full-time employment. For most, participation in the GL coincided with a strengthening of young people's vision of this future self, in particular some young people gained a more specific idea of what type of employment they wished to progress into. However, young people still held fundamental doubts over whether they could achieve this idealised self, and many feared they would face unemployment and even imprisonment in the future. This could indicate that young people still held a tenuous pro-social identity upon leaving employment with the GL.

6.2.6. Overall

Did young people's identities change during their participation in employment? Overall, it would appear so, but the change was not a dramatic one. Firstly, it should be emphasised that few young people had a strong criminal identity when they commenced the GL. This is evidenced by the fact that in the 0-month interviews most participants tried to minimise past involvement in offending, many resented others referring to them as offenders and most desired full-time legitimate employment in the future. The latter was a reasonably surprising finding. Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph (2002) purported that the fashioning of a new conventional 'replacement self' occurs only after and as a result of involvement in conventional roles or hooks. Yet for the GL employees, most had envisioned a future self engaged in full-time work before they had had much involvement with the scheme. Secondly, when young people completed their GL placement they did not possess a fully pro-social identity. This is demonstrated by the fact that contradictory narratives - where young people would include pro-social and anti-social representations of themselves within the same story - were still apparent even in the 6-month interviews. Furthermore, whilst

most young people had envisioned a future self as a non-offending legitimate worker, participants presented real uncertainties in their narratives as to whether they would actually gain employment and stop offending in the future.

So how did identities alter during GL participation? Young people began the GL scheme being open to change. However, as they advanced through the placement, they described themselves as firmly on a changed path, a decision they had made previously, but which had been aided by their choice to participate in the GL. At the same time, young people sought to greater separate themselves from past offences and negative behaviours. Thus, by detaching themselves from their past self and writing the GL into their story of change, the participants formed a more coherent pro-social self. That young people formed an increasingly coherent pro-social identity during their participation in the GL is further illustrated in *how* they recounted their lives at different time intervals. Over time, these accounts also became more coherent. At 0-months, young people's self-story was that they were an individual who had made past mistakes (although they minimise these), who might need to change their behaviours, who had been 'put' on the GL by the YOT and who wanted to gain full-time employment in the future. Presser and Sandburg (2015) term disjointed accounts like these a chronicle approach to narrative. However by 6-months how young people told their self-story altered. At this point, they were an individual who had prior involvement in offending (though they largely detach their responsibility for this) and decided to make a change because they knew things would get much worse. They chose to partake in the GL to help with this change and (for most) it has aided their vision of a positive future self, which they are now working towards. Thus, by 6-months, the participants have a more coherent story, with a moral message contained within it, particularly those who include examples of their new altruistic self; they are the hero in the story who saved themselves from the abyss.

Therefore, overall, it can be concluded from this analysis that during participation in the GL, young people did not transform from a deviant to a pro-social identity. Instead, involvement in the GL became integrated into their already emerging story of change and strengthened it. Their pro-social identity became more coherent. As such, there was little evidence that participants' identity change was to a more mature self-view, as scholars such as Massoglia and Uggen (2010) and Walters (2018) suggested in their maturational theory of desistance (see outline of this in section 3.3.4). Young people's narratives detailed a journey of change from a past offender to a future pro-social self; they did not depict a transition into adulthood.

6.3. Was it because of meaningful work?

The findings presented above suggest that young people formed a stronger pro-social identity during the period they spent working at the GL. This section discusses whether the observed changes in identity can be attributed to young people's participation in meaningful work.

6.3.1. New purposes

The findings demonstrate that several elements of meaningful employment strengthened young people's vision of a pro-social 'future self' employed in the legitimate sphere. Firstly, learning new skills boosted some young people's confidence that they could engage in legitimate work in the future, reinforcing their imagined pro-social self. Even learning basic skills for employment such as developing a routine, enhanced feelings of self-efficacy in the conventional sphere. As Dean described –

“I just feel more confident I could actually work now cos I've learned a routine, getting up early and that”

Likewise, Julie explained that she had learnt how to manage relationships with co-workers and this made her feel more confident about future employment -

“Like I wasn't like a person to work in a group but now its alright. Just like I can. If I was to do it again like I think I would be alright cos proper nervous when I first come on here... I'd be more confident working in groups”

At the GL, employees engaged in a wide variety of work tasks, consequently exposing young people to many new skills. Some participants described that familiarising themselves with what these jobs entailed made them feel more prepared for work in the future. As Scott stated –

“It covers quite a lot... a wide variety of stuff... you get to come to terms with a lot of different stuff. We've done from picking weeds to painting benches to bricklaying to like all sorts, cleaning cars and we've done absolutely all sorts. So loadsa those jobs now I reckon I'd be ok at, I'd know that basics of what I was doing at least, I won't look like a complete idiot”

Similarly Max affirmed –

“Its learning aspects of jobs I wouldn't normally do. We've done fencing, paving, made those river steps, strimming and gardening and making signs. If I come across it in another job I'll be ready to do it. I know what to do the next time, I'm more confident now. That's the best thing about the [GL], it's getting us ready.”

Max and Scott describe how the GL, by introducing them to many different work skills, reassured them that they would not appear inept if they were to engage in legitimate work in the future. Harris (2011) reports that those who feel incompetent in the conventional world cannot conceive of a replacement self and stick to criminality where they feel more

proficient. Meaningful employment, which allows for skill development, is therefore very important to promote feelings of competence for offenders and aid their vision of a pro-social self.

Secondly, experiencing personal achievement at work aided some young people's ability to envision a pro-social future self. As John's words illustrated -

"Doing all this stuff, it's a challenge and I've seen me better self. Now that I've stuck at these six-months, done me job, I know I can do it. It wasn't a test like to see if I could do it but I just know I could. I could go to work out there now... I don't need to make me money from crime".

Moreover, the praise from the supervisor for their achievements made some participants feel that they could attain legitimate employment and engage successfully with it. As Julie described -

"I was speaking to Greg and like I haven't got many qualifications and he was saying the way I've been working at the [GL], I've been doing so well and that, he says in the next six months there's an apprenticeship with the environment agency and I should apply. And I was thinking I can do it – if I want to do it I can do it – I'm going to prove him right which I know I'm more than capable of doing and I'll do it."

The impact of the supervisor's praise on young people's imagined future selves was also highlighted in my conversation with Jay –

Me: "what sort of job would you like to do in the future?"

Jay: "Fencing. Cos I'm good at it. Fred's told us I'm good at doing the heighting, that's difficult, once you've measured then it's easy. I could fence all day me... So yeah, now I could see meself doing that. I could have me own little company going."

Thus, the GL introduced young people to some of the skills necessary for future employment and allowed them to experience a degree of success in the conventional sphere through the praise and encouragement of supervisors. This gave some young people confidence that a future as a legitimate worker was a realistic possibility and aided their pro-social identity development.

Thirdly, completing physically demanding work helped some young males visualise a pro-social future self. I suggested in chapter 5 that participants found engaging in manual outdoor work to be meaningful because it fitted with traditional hegemonic working-class ideals of masculinity. As Simpson, Hughes and Slutskaya (2016) report, manual workers may define their masculinity through physical labour. The toughness of the heavy physical labour is interpreted as manly confrontation with the task. From observations, I witnessed some young people adopting a 'grafter' role at the GL and taking pride in this newfound

purpose. This especially appeared to occur towards the end of their placement at the GL, and I attributed this to the supervisor allowing young people to work more autonomously and with less supervision by this stage. By being trusted to work independently, these young people felt they were the equivalent of adult male labourers. As Darrell asserted –

“this is the sort of work males my age should be doing, its physical work. They need lads like us to get this done; we can get the job done on time”

Likewise, Alexander described how participating in manual work was more appropriate for males of his age-group than offending–

“I’m doing good now. Instead of knocking the shit out of some asshole, I’m taking it out on that tree, getting it cut down so people and their dogs and that can get past. And that’s what I should be doing now, I’m not a fucking kid... I’ve seen 20 year olds and that put windows through and that and run off cos they want a police chase. That’s something a 14, 15 year old should be doing. Not a 20 year old. When you look at people doing stuff like that you just think I used to do shit like that but I stopped when I was 17, so why the fuck are you carrying on doing it? People just don’t know how to grow up properly”

In essence, young people were exposed to a different way of ‘doing masculinity’ through engaging in manual work at the GL. Carlsson (2013) reports that participating in law-abiding employment can be a way to meet masculine gender expectations after adolescence when offending is no longer status building. Likewise other scholars also affirm that masculinity can be achieved through being a ‘worker’ (Uggen, 2000; Fader and Traylor, 2015; Weaver and McNeill, 2015; Halsey, Armstrong and Wright, 2016). Alexander’s conversation illustrated this, as he described continuing offending to be inappropriate at his age. Thus, being able to adopt the role of tough manual worker at the GL allowed young males to see that they could still be a ‘man’ and achieve valued gender norms in the legitimate sphere. This realisation strengthened some young people’s emerging pro-social identity.

Pratt and Ashforth (2003) suggest that finding meaning from our employment might influence our identity because it provides a sense of purpose that affects who we see ourselves as. Overall, developing new skills, receiving praise from supervisors for their achievements, engaging in physically demanding work and being trusted to work autonomously gave some GL attendees a sense of meaningful purpose as a legitimate worker. These young people began to see legitimate employment as a feasible option for their ‘future self’. Although, as described in section 6.2.5, many still could not guarantee that this would come to fruition, employment at the GL - at the very least - strengthened its viability as an option. The GL could therefore be a ‘hook’ for identity change. It offered

young people a new purpose, a new answer to ‘why am I here?’, which could in turn impact upon their answer to ‘who am I?’ (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003).

6.3.2. Changing the perceptions of others

Meaningful employment not only exposes offenders to a new purpose, it exposes them to a purpose that others consider ‘pro-social’. As outlined in chapter 5 (section 5.2.1) much of the GL work ‘did good’ for the communities in which it took place. The public had a positive response to young people carrying out this work. For youths who were used to the negative reactions of others in their communities because of their anti-social behaviour, this was a big change. Indeed, Joseph explained –

“everyone in that neighbourhood thinks I’m a little bastard, because - to be fair - I was, but now they are glad I’m working. They all recognise me, you nah, and they say you’re doing good. I was like - fucking hell. Nice to hear though innit?”

The work that young people undertook appeared to change the public’s opinions of them. Lofland (1969: 210) describes ‘hyper-conformity’ being necessary before the stigma from being involved in crime will cease. Likewise, McNeill and Maruna (2008) describe ‘hyper-moralism’ being required on the part of ex-offenders in order for community members to view them as anything other than deviants. Performing environmental work in the community was the necessary hyper-conforming moral role that engendered positive reactions from others. GL attendees were not only engaging in employment, they were observable in the community doing work that benefits society. Moreover, some of the work at the GL involved cleaning up the crimes of others, such as cleaning graffiti, removing fly-tipped items and repairing the damage done by vandals. This especially symbolised to the public that these young people were reformed offenders, who were making good to the community for the harms done to it.

Furthermore, engagement in work that helps local communities may be the necessary ‘signal’ that Bushway and Apel (2012) described (a means to visibly demonstrate to society that an offender has changed - see section 3.3.2). It could also serve to fulfil Maruna’s (2011) criteria for a reintegration ritual by allowing ex-offenders a chance to ‘act out’ the internal change they have undergone, which is recognised by the public. The narrative analysis in section 6.2 indicated that most young people had an emerging pro-social identity when they commenced the GL. Participation in employment with transcendent benefits allowed youths to act this identity out; they could display to others that they could do good for the community, rather than harm. In turn, the positive appraisal by the public reemphasised the value of the identity to GL employees. As discussed earlier, much of our identity is based on who others think we are (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1956; Jenkins, 2004; Stevens, 2012). Therefore, when others label us as pro-social this will

inevitably make it more likely that we will internalise a pro-social identity. For example, Scott stated –

“It’s nice that these people don’t know your past and they don’t know what you’ve done they just know who you are now. They just see us fixing up the neighbourhood, helping people out”

Seeing their self-view reflected back to them in the eyes of the general public strengthened young people’s configuration of a pro-social identity.

Nonetheless, there may have been occasions where GL employees did not perceive that the public viewed them positively. Supervisors explained that when young people first started the employment programme they were convinced that witnesses of their work would believe they were offenders undertaking reparations in the community, rather than paid employees. Supervisors challenged these views. As Greg detailed –

“They’ve got this thing that everybody thinks that they’re offenders. This is when we first started. So I just went driving round, being like – ‘there’s a high-vis, there’s a high-vis, that cyclist’s got one on – do you think he’s probation?’ Just because probation wear high-vis doesn’t mean everyone wearing them is probation. It’s just their mindset, trying to get them out of that mindset.”

However, despite supervisors’ efforts, it cannot be denied that some of the work GL employees engaged in was similar to what young offenders would typically undertake for their reparations. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that a contributing factor to what made young people feel that their work at the GL changed the public’s opinions of them, was the effort this employment programme made to ‘re-label’ young people as employees, rather than offenders. For example, the van they travelled to work in and all their clothing, was embossed with the logo of the social enterprise. This ensured that passersby would know that these young people were working for a company, rather than doing community service.

Thus, participation in meaningful work that visibly benefits the community resulted in a degree of civic re-integration for youths. Young people changed their opinions of the public. Supervisors described young people becoming better citizens following their participation in the GL - they became more polite to members of the community and stopped dropping litter. Likewise, the community appeared to alter their opinions about the youths. As a consequence of both sides changing their perceptions, young people’s pro-social identity was strengthened. As McGuinn (2018) proposes, the necessary identity for desistance will only form if offender alienation is reduced, and they are able to re-assimilate to larger society.

Engaging in work that benefitted others also changed the perceptions of those much closer to the young participants. Some young people described their family viewing them

more positively since they had been working at the GL. This is illustrated in my conversation with John –

Me: “Do you think working at the [GL] has affected your relationship with your family?”

John: “It’s made it better really. Better now I’m deying something good with meself. I wasn’t in this place a couple of years ago, I wasn’t in this headspace, so I’ve made them proud ya naw, I’ve changed me life around. I’ve been to jail and that, ya naw, so now they can see that I’m not that person and I’m willing to work, I can work, I can help people. They know I’m not that person. They see me as a different person, 100%.”

Several other participants expressed that their families were proud of them for engaging in employment at the GL, and some took photos of their achievements at work to show family members. Due to their offending, young people’s relationship with their families had often become strained prior to their engagement with the GL. Young people were used to family members being disappointed in them and their behaviour. John’s comments demonstrated how this changed when working at the GL; family members began to see them as a ‘new person’ and were proud of their commitment to pro-social activities. This necessarily impacted upon young people’s identities.

Supervisors also made clear to young people that because they were working, they would regard them differently. As Greg stated –

“I drill it in to them, they’re ex-offenders; you’ve done that, you’ve moved on. Everybody has a past and this is the start of your new life. You’re a worker now, and what you are doing is good for people and good for the community.”

Thus, GL supervisors made an effort to treat young people as conventional workers, rather than young offenders whilst they were engaging in the programme. As the GL employees progressed through their placement, supervisors put greater trust in them to complete work tasks with less supervision. In my discussion with Ross about his role in young people’s journey of change, he explained how the trust he put in young people influenced their behaviour –

“we do build up a really good relationship and some of them I think, they almost don’t want to disappoint yeh, they don’t want to let me down, they don’t want to disappoint me, because I’ve put my faith in them as well. I think my relationship can have an effect and does have an effect”

These comments indicate that being trusted not to reoffend, being treated as an autonomous worker, rather than a delinquent youth, gave the impression to young people that supervisors viewed them as a law-abiding individual. Young people felt that they needed to live up to this label. Because they were trusted at the GL, this became a self-fulfilling prophecy; young

people believed that they must indeed be trustworthy. This strengthened their pro-social identity.

6.3.3. Relatedness

In chapter 5 (section 5.2.6.) I established that most GL employees formed meaningful social bonds with their co-workers. These bonds supported young people's pro-social identity development. As stated by McNeill and Maruna (2008) if an offender is going to take the risk to transform their identity they need to feel they have social support to undertake this precarious venture. Similarly, Paternoster and Bushway (2009) purport that those wishing to desist are more likely to be successful if they are embedded in social networks that support their new identities. For example, Scott distinguished his friends on the GL from those outside –

“My friends outside, although they are my friends, they don't have my best interests at heart. These guys like want to see you do well, they want to see you go further. We are all wanting to do the same thing, we all want to get a job at the end of it so we are all teaching each other new skills, we are all helping each other. That's what I like about it though, cos it's a different group from what I am like at home.”

Likewise, Joseph described how friendships with other employees supported his process of change –

“It's like when I weren't on it [the GL] and I were hanging around with my mates I were starting to like realise and obviously I started to want to change myself and change my ways, but they weren't seeing it from that point of view. They were like – ‘oh you won't get caught, do this, do that’. It were just like being around people who were realising like obviously it's stupid and they want to change themselves and they actually want a decent life. It's obviously like we both - well all three of us - want to do the exact same thing, so it's just like... being around them”

Whilst his co-workers may be still in a process of change, they all want the ‘same thing’: to have a ‘worker’ rather than an offender identity. By observing this, it reiterates to Joseph that his own self-transformation is worthwhile and possible.

As described in chapter 2 (section 2.3.1), meaningful interpersonal relationships between co-workers allow for a degree of ‘psychological safety’ at work (Kahn, 2007; May, Gilson and Harter, 2004; Monteith and Giesburt, 2017). Dutton and Heapy (2003) state that this psychological safety can allow employees to explore alternative identities at work. Thus, for an offender who is trying to re-configure their identity, being placed in an environment that promotes such psychological safety, means that they feel safe to try out a more pro-social identity, without fear of ridicule. This is illustrated in my conversation with Alexander -

Me: “What's motivated you not to drop out?”

Alexander: "I'd say it's the people in here, working with 'em, they're a good laugh, I fucking trust them, they're ace, I like them. My mates would take the piss out of us for doing this sorta thing, but to me cutting a big ass tree down there cos people can't get past, that's a good deed. These I'm working with aren't idiots. People at home are fucking retards."

Thus, Alexander distinguished his GL peers from those outside who would mock his engagement in legitimate work.

It may seem counter-intuitive that meaningful bonds with *other offenders* would support pro-social identity development. However, the findings in this study demonstrated that even those with a history of criminal involvement can act as pro-social role models. As Weaver (2013; 2016) explains, if an offender observes someone else who is similarly situated to them cease offending, a person they can identify with - such as a deviant peer - this can aid in their conceptualisation of a possible changed version of themselves. The findings in this study indicate that this notion works at a more intricate level. In some of the cohorts I observed, those perceived to be further along the *desistance process* inadvertently gave integrity to others' imagined version of themselves changed. For example, Joseph described his respect for another cohort member William –

"his family chucked him out cos he was getting in trouble, but then he just packed all that in, just like that, and now he does boxing and he's getting into apprenticeships and just generally getting his shit together. So just from speaking to him and shit that's when I've like realised, that's what I need to be doing."

Joseph saw William as a positive role model and also – importantly – a credible one. Because the GL youths were of similar age and had common histories of involvement in offending, they were particularly suitable candidates to act as credible role models for identity change. Those further along the desistance process could serve as real-life examples of young people's envisioned future self.

Thus, this section highlights another way in which meaningful employment at the GL aided pro-social identity formation. By promoting close bonds amongst young offenders who - crucially - were open to change, this provided social support and created a safe environment to try out new identities. Moreover, those young people that were further along the desistance process functioned as credible role models for those at the outset, strengthening imagined future selves. Nonetheless, I cannot claim that the bonds formed among GL employees were wholly productive in terms of pro-social identity configuration. Not only can there be pro-social role models, but anti-social ones too. Greg gave an example –

“If one’s selling drugs and the other wants the drugs it [the GL group] can be a bad thing. In a previous cohort that happened, one young person was a bad apple and the others started slipping”.

However, GL supervisors played a key role in managing the social dynamics of work groups to minimise the occurrence of negative peer pressure, and this diminished its detrimental effect upon pro-social identity formation.

The GL supervisor also functioned as a credible role model for identity change. Chapter 5 (section 5.2.6) noted that often at the GL, employees formed close bonds with their supervisor. Indeed, some young people perceived their supervisor as a peer, rather than a boss, because of the ‘banter’ he brought to the work group. In some instances supervisors admitted to participants that they too had been deviant in their youth, but had chosen a different path to success in adulthood. This made supervisors appear as a credible role model; through his work at the GL, he demonstrated a different lifestyle these young people could choose. Because of the efforts supervisors made to be relatable, he presented a possible ‘future self’. In fact, some young people described wishing to do the supervisor’s job in the future. Thus, bonds with supervisors also aided pro-social identity development.

6.3.4. Overall

The evidence outlined in this section suggests that the consolidation of young people’s pro-social identities can be attributed to their engagement in meaningful employment at the GL. Several participants described that organisational practices such as opportunities for skill development, personal achievement, self-determination and manual work gave them a sense of purpose as a legitimate worker, strengthening their conceptualisation of a pro-social self. Participating in meaningful employment and experiencing success in this role allowed the youths to envision a future self within the conventional sphere and hence reinforced their pro-social identity. These findings resonate with what was theorised in the literature review chapters, regarding the relationship between meaningful employment and identity. As purported by Pratt and Ashforth (2003) finding a sense of purpose, or the answer to ‘why am I here?’ through meaningful work, impacts upon the answer to ‘who am I’?

Aside from Pratt and Ashforth’s (2003) article, which is not in the criminological field, current research provides few clues as to how meaningful employment might influence identity. The findings presented in this section revealed that it is not only the sense of ‘purpose’ that arises from meaningful work that aids pro-social identity construction. Firstly, it is also how such work changes the perceptions of others. Participating in employment is considered a pro-social activity by society and might therefore have strengthened young

people's pro-social identities. Indeed, as Owens (2009) and Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph (2002) purported, employment forms part of the criteria for 'respectability' in society. However, my research suggests that what was particularly valuable for pro-social identity development was participating in meaningful work that visibly 'did good' for the community. Such work overtly displayed the change inherent in the young person to those in both their immediate social sphere and to wider society. The changed perceptions of these individuals aided young people's pro-social identity formation; they saw their desired change reflected in the eyes of others. Secondly, also important for pro-social identity development was the relatedness that meaningful work creates among co-workers. This generated the necessary supportive environment for young people to 'try out' a pro-social self. Moreover, forming bonds with other offenders at various stages of the desistance process meant that participants had credible role models for identity change.

Thus, it must be acknowledged that - in part - it was the particular organisation of this social enterprise that aided young people's pro-social identity consolidation. Only at the GL could employees form bonds *with other offenders*, which would provide them with 'credible' role models for change. Similarly, a contributing factor to why young people felt that others viewed them as 'pro-social' during their time working was the efforts supervisors made to treat young people as legitimate workers, rather than offenders. They also tried to challenge young people's perceptions of the public. Thus, in these instances, it was not experiencing meaningful employment that influenced participants' identities, but rather it was the particular set-up of the work programme. How crucial these elements were in strengthening young people's pro-social identity, cannot be identified in the data. Would the meaningful organisational practices of the GL scheme (see table 5.4 in chapter 5) have been sufficient to influence young people's identities without the high level of support from supervisors or relatable young offenders? I cannot be sure, and this is a limitation to using an employment 'programme' to investigate meaningful employment. This issue is discussed further in chapter 8 (section 8.3.1).

6.4. Conclusion

Research aim 3 of this project was to assess the impact of engaging in meaningful employment upon young offenders' identities. From the evidence presented in the chapter, I can conclude that during young people's participation in the GL, they developed a stronger pro-social identity. However, most possessed a reasonably pro-social identity before they commenced the employment scheme, and even after GL involvement, it was not absolute. Overall, the change in participants' identities was notable, but not dramatic. During their engagement in the GL, young people did not transform from a deviant to pro-social self-view. Instead, involvement in this employment scheme became integrated into their already

emerging story of change and strengthened it. Their narrative of change became more coherent, though they could still not guarantee that they would live a crime-free life in the future – a significant limitation. I found that employment at the GL aided pro-social identity formation by several means. Firstly, participating in manual work, learning new skills and experiencing success in this role gave youths a sense of meaningful purpose as a legitimate worker, strengthening their vision of a future self within the conventional sphere. Secondly, working at the GL gave young people the opportunity to experience their actions and themselves labelled as pro-social by others. Of particular importance was the work with transcendent benefits conducted at the GL, which promoted a degree of civic reintegration for young people. Thirdly, the close social bonds formed between the employees of the work programme resulted in the GL being a safe, supportive environment for identity development. In particular, forming bonds with other offenders at various stages of the desistance process meant that young people had credible role models for identity change.

Thus, the findings presented in this chapter were complex. Not only was the change in young people's identities fairly subtle, but the reason for the change could not be solely attributed to participants finding 'meaning' from their employment. Also important was the way in which such employment influenced their relationships with others: specifically, how young people believed others perceived them and the relatedness they experienced with their co-workers. Furthermore, the particular organisation of the GL, which brought offenders to work together in a supportive environment, played a role. The next chapter shall attempt to discern whether participation in meaningful employment had an impact upon desistance.

7. Findings: The impact of meaningful employment upon desistance

7.1. Introduction

In the previous findings chapters, I outlined participants' criteria for meaningful employment and specified that the GL employment scheme largely fulfilled these criteria (chapter 5). I also established that engagement in meaningful employment at the GL aided pro-social identity development (chapter 6). This chapter investigates whether participation in meaningful work promotes desistance among participants. I present data from young people's official offending records, their self-reported offending and supervisor reports of offending. In accordance with the definition of desistance outlined in chapter 1, I utilise this data to divide the participants of this study into desisters and persisters. I then seek to establish the extent to which participation in meaningful employment and the ensuing development of a pro-social identity can account for young people's desistance/persistence. However, in doing this I recognise that other factors are relevant to young people's desistance/persistence, beyond the concepts of 'meaning' and 'identity' that were the focus of this study.

7.2. Are young people desisting or persisting?

This section considers whether participants were desisting or persisting during and following their engagement with the GL. I examine official offending records, self-reports and supervisor reports of offending.

7.2.1. Official offending records

Official records demonstrated a notable reduction in the volume and frequency of offending during the six months young people worked at the GL, when compared to pre-GL involvement. The volume of offences young people committed decreased by **36.4%** during GL participation. Likewise, the frequency of young people's offending decreased by **40.3%** during GL participation. There was no difference in offending seriousness after young people began work. Official records demonstrated a less significant reduction in the volume and frequency of offending in the six months after young people left GL employment, when compared to pre-GL involvement. The volume of offences young people committed decreased by **3.6%** after GL participation. Likewise, the frequency of young people's offending decreased by **6.49%** after GL participation. Young people's offending seriousness decreased by **5.5%** after GL participation.

In chapter 1, I clarified that in this thesis, desistance would be defined as the process of abstaining or refraining from criminal activity over time, rather than the complete

cessation of criminal activities. I explained that for my quantitative data, this would mean that desistance would involve observing a reduction in the volume, frequency or seriousness of offending. Therefore, these statistics might indicate that the GL promoted desistance (due to the decrease in offending volume and frequency observed during employment) but only for the period in which young people were engaged in work (as the decrease in offending volume, frequency and seriousness observed after GL participation was negligible).

Nevertheless, these statistics should be considered with caution, as they encompassed the offending of all participants, including those who did not complete the six-month GL placement. Ian, Tim, Adam, Rory and Harry dropped out between three and four months into the scheme. They may not have attended the GL long enough to fully benefit from it. If their offending records are removed from the analysis, offending volume and frequency decreased by **78.1%** and **74.7%** respectively during GL participation. Offending seriousness decreased by **0.39%** during GL participation. In the six-months after GL participation, if only those who completed the scheme are included in the analysis, offending volume and frequency decreased by **46.5%** and **48%** respectively. Offending seriousness increased by **0.34%** after GL participation.

Therefore, when surveying only those young people who participated in employment for six months, a more notable decrease in offending volume and frequency is observed during and after GL participation. Thus providing stronger evidence of desistance. Nonetheless, a pattern is apparent across both sets of statistics. Regardless of the young people included in the analysis, the impact upon offending volume and frequency is greater in the six-months young people were engaged in the scheme, than in the six-months after this. This might suggest that the ‘good effects’ of participation in the GL wear off somewhat when young people leave the scheme. Furthermore, differences in offending seriousness before, during and after GL participation, regardless of which young people are included in the analysis, are negligible. This might indicate that working at the GL has little effect upon the seriousness of offences committed. Please see tables 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3 displaying this data.

Table 7.1 Offending volume of youths before, during and after Green Light employment (official records)

		Average number of offences per quarter pre GL employment	Average number of offences per quarter during GL employment	Average number of offences per quarter six months post GL employment
Landington Cohort 1	Julie	0.58	0	0
	Sam	0.67	0	0
	Gary	1.94	0	4
	Tim	0.69	8	9.5
Landington Cohort 2	John	2.23	0	0
	Kevin	0.68	0.5	0.5
	Glenn	1.08	0	0
Landington Cohort 3	Kyle	1.22	2	3
	Dale	1	0	0
Telville Cohort 1	William	0.67	0	0
	Joseph	0.5	0	0
	Darrell	1.11	0	0.5
Telville Cohort 2	Adam	0.5	0	0.5
	Rory	1.33	2	1
Telville Cohort 3	Scott	1.71	0	0
	Alexander	0.2	0	0
	Dean	2	0	0
	Ian	1.94	2	2
Wheatburgh Cohort 1	Max	0.86	2	0
	Harry	0.57	0	0.5
	George	0.83	0	3
	Stephen	2.75	0	0
	Jay	0.5	0	0

Table 7.2 Offending frequency of youths before, during and after Green Light employment (official records)

		Average number of 'offending incidents' per quarter pre GL employment	Average number of 'offending incidents' per quarter during GL employment	Average number of 'offending incidents' per quarter six months post GL employment
Landington Cohort 1	Julie	0.5	0	0
	Sam	0.44	0	0
	Gary	1.64	0	3
	Tim	0.56	4	6
Landington Cohort 2	John	1.69	0	0
	Kevin	0.53	0.5	0.5
	Glenn	0.42	0	0
Landington Cohort 3	Kyle	1.11	2	1
	Dale	0.57	0	0
Telville Cohort 1	William	0.5	0	0
	Joseph	0.5	0	0
	Darrell	0.44	0	0.5
Telville Cohort 2	Adam	0.5	0	0.5
	Rory	1	1	0.5
Telville Cohort 3	Scott	0.86	0	0
	Alexander	0.2	0	0
	Dean	1	0	0
	Ian	1.72	2	2
Wheatburgh Cohort 1	Max	0.43	1	0
	Harry	0.48	0	0.5
	George	0.58	0	2
	Stephen	1.75	0	0
	Jay	0.38	0	0

Table 7.3 Offending seriousness of youths before, during and after Green Light employment (official records)

		Average offence seriousness pre GL employment	Average offence seriousness during GL employment	Average offence seriousness six months post GL employment
Landington Cohort 1	Julie	2.71		
	Sam	2.25		
	Gary	3.79		3.38
	Tim	2.91	3	3
Landington Cohort 2	John	2.83		
	Kevin	2.31	3	3
	Glenn	3.31		
Landington Cohort 3	Kyle	2.63	2	2.67
	Dale	3.86		
Telville Cohort 1	William	4		
	Joseph	3.2		
	Darrell	3		2
Telville Cohort 2	Adam	3		2
	Rory	3.92	3	3.5
Telville Cohort 3	Scott	2.5		
	Alexander	3.5		
	Dean	6		
	Ian	3.14	4	4
Wheatburgh Cohort 1	Max	2.83	2.75	
	Harry	3.25		2
	George	2.9		3.67
	Stephen	2.91		
	Jay	2.5		

7.2.2. Supervisor and self-reports of offending

As acknowledged in the methods chapter, there are limitations to official records of offending; they may not capture all offending that an individual is involved in. Thus, it was necessary to consult supervisor and self-reports of offending also. Confirming the findings from official records, some young people reported having stopped offending since working with the GL. For example, Alexander stated –

“Yeah I haven’t got into any trouble or owt, I’ve stayed in til I need to go to where I need to go. Know what I mean? I weren’t always causing trouble like I used to.”

Likewise Glenn asserted – “I was always committing crime. And now I don’t. Now I just go to work and go to sleep.” However, supervisor and self-reports mostly demonstrated that the majority of GL youths (87%) were still actively partaking in low-level criminal activities. For many young people, this unofficial offending involved drug use. As a supervisor stated –

“Are they carrying out the offences they’ve got their current court order for? Probably not. But are they involved in any other kind of criminal sort of behaviour whether that’s you know low-level drug dealing or smoking cannabis or whatever? Possibly.”

Young people appeared to have evaded capture for these illegal activities. It is also possible that even if brought to the attention of the police, crimes such as possession of cannabis would not be a police priority and might not be recorded.

Thus, the results from my analysis of the official statistics may over-emphasise the extent of young people’s desistance. Most of those who had not officially reoffended in the one year I followed their criminal records could not be said to be ‘crime free’. As a supervisor purported - “are they going to become completely upstanding members of the community, have they made that massive leap? Probably not”. This complements what was found in my analysis of young people’s identities in the previous chapter – by the end of their employment with the GL most young people possessed a reasonably coherent pro-social identity, but it was not absolute. Contradictory narratives confirming a pro-criminal attitude were still present.

However, many of those who disclosed low-level criminal activities still believed that they were desisting. Youths who admitted to using drugs or underage drinking would explain confidently in the same narrative that they were not offending. For participants, these activities did not represent a continuation of illegal behaviour. This was particularly true of cannabis use; indeed, I heard John say - “I don’t do any drugs, I just do cannabis”. Whether these findings support Parker, Aldridge and Measham (1998), who purport that recreational drug use is so familiar to those aged below 35 years that it should be regarded as ‘normal’, or Shiner and Newburn (1997) who contest that soft drug use is still a minority

past-time and insufficient to constitute normalisation, is unclear. The young people in this study were largely from a particular subset of society, where economic deprivation, trauma and social exclusion are common. They were not representative of the young population as a whole.

I specified in the methodology chapter (section 4.4.3) that I would consider desistance objectively, it would not matter that young people believed themselves to be desisting, I would endeavour as far as possible to investigate whether this was a reality. Nonetheless, I do not consider that these reports of continued low-level offending are sufficient to deny that most young people at the GL were desisting. It is important that research does not over-emphasise the change offenders can realistically make. To completely abstain from illegal activity is highly unlikely in any individual, particularly during adolescence (Moffit, 1993). Furthermore, the most common offences that young people were involved with prior to their placement with the GL were burglary, criminal damage and common assault. To renounce these but still be committing some minor offences, such as cannabis use and underage drinking, is still a notable change in behaviour and following my own and others definitions (Bushway et al., 2001; Bushway, Thornberry and Krohn, 2003; Bottoms et al., 2004) constitutes desistance. Thus, whilst official statistics might indicate that participation in employment at the GL has little effect upon offence seriousness, unofficial reports suggest otherwise.

7.2.3. Who are the desisters and who are the persisters?

In summary, official records of offending behaviours revealed that most participants reduced their involvement in offending during the scheme, and - to a lesser extent - during the six-months after this. However, supervisors' and self-reports disclosed that low-level crimes that would not be atypical for youths of their age continued. I consider that this low-level offending was not sufficiently serious to deny that most young people attending the GL were desisting – by reference to the definition of desistance used in this project (section 1.3). Nonetheless, I can only say that *most* not *all* employees were desisting. Official records revealed that there were some participants who committed serious offences whilst working at the GL and during the six-month follow up period. Of particular note was **Tim**, who committed offences during his employment of similar seriousness to those he had committed previously. He then dropped out mid-way through the programme and continued to offend. As a result, he was imprisoned. Both **Gary** and **George** did not reoffend whilst they were at the GL, but committed several serious offences after the GL and received prison sentences. Furthermore, **Ian** was given two chances of a placement at the GL, but stopped attending on

both of these occasions. Ian continued to offend and was eventually incarcerated. In addition, **Kevin, Rory and Kyle** also continued to offend at a similar frequency and seriousness both during and after the GL. I consider these individuals to be the persisters.

Accordingly, I have described whom I consider to be the persisters in this study, but what about the desisters? A number of young people did not officially reoffend during their GL placement or for six months after this. Namely – **Sam, John, Glenn, William, Joseph, Julie, Dean, Alexander, Scott, Stephen, Dale and Jay**. There was no mention of any serious offending in self/supervisor reports for these individuals. Therefore, they can straightforwardly be considered desisters. However, I have also chosen to add some others to their group. **Darrell, Harry and Adam** each committed one offence in the six-month follow-up period; however, it is worth noting that these were significantly less serious than the offences they had previously perpetrated. I therefore believe that they can be considered desisters, following the definition of desistance constructed in chapter 1 and referred to in this chapter. **Max** had two offending incidents while he was at the GL. However, he did not offend at all during the six-month follow-up period. As this indicates a notable decrease in his offending frequency, I also consider him a desister.

Thus, many more of the participants were desisting rather than persisting; most reduced their involvement in serious offending, both during and following their employment with the scheme. However, can this observed decrease in criminal activities be attributed to young people's participation in meaningful employment at the GL? And how to explain those who were persisting? These questions are addressed in the following sections of this chapter.

7.3. Explaining desistance

Several supervisors stated that engagement in the GL helped young people stop reoffending. Furthermore, when I asked those young people who reported a decrease in their criminal activities what had caused this, many attributed this to their participation in the GL scheme. This section shall explore the reasons for this reported connection between engagement in employment at the GL and desistance. However, first it must be established that those young people who appeared to be desisting during their employment at the GL were not already on the pathway to desistance and would have reduced criminal activities without engaging in the scheme. If this were the case, it would negate the value of meaningful employment in aiding desistance. Whilst it may still have supported the process, if participation in such work only aids those who were going to desist anyway, this undermines any potential policy implications (see chapter 9) and the value of this research.

7.3.1. Were desisters going to desist anyway?

The participants in this study had varying offending histories. Although most (though not all – see table 4.1, chapter 4) were considered medium-risk offenders at the time of commencing the GL, the number of prior offences, the average prior offence seriousness and the age of onset differed among young employees. Might it be that the desisters in this study were simply less ‘criminal’ than the persisters and this is what determined their reduced offending during and post-GL? However, the (official) data demonstrated little connection between the prior criminality of the young person and the resultant desistance/persistence. See tables 7.4 – 7.6 below demonstrating this.

Table 7.4 Young people's volume of offences prior to Green Light involvement and their desistance/persistence

Names of young people	Number of offences committed pre-GL	Desister or Persister?
Ian	35	Persister
Gary	33	Persister
John	29	Desister
Glenn	13	Desister
Kevin	13	Persister
Rory	12	Persister
Scott	12	Desister
Sam	12	Desister
Max	12	Desister
Harry	12	Desister
Tim	11	Persister
Kyle	11	Persister
Stephen	11	Desister
Darrell	10	Desister
George	10	Persister
Julie	7	Desister
Dale	7	Desister
Joseph	5	Desister
William	4	Desister
Jay	4	Desister
Adam	2	Desister
Alexander	2	Desister
Dean	2	Desister

Table 7.5 Young people's offending seriousness prior to Green Light involvement and their desistance/persistence

Names of young people	Average Offence Seriousness pre-GL	Desister or Persister?
Dean	6	Desister
William	4	Desister
Rory	3.92	Persister
Dale	3.86	Desister
Gary	3.79	Persister
Alexander	3.5	Desister
Glenn	3.31	Desister
Harry	3.25	Desister
Joseph	3.2	Desister
Ian	3.14	Persister
Julie	2.71	Desister
Sam	2.25	Desister
Darrell	3	Desister
Adam	3	Desister
Tim	2.91	Persister
Stephen	2.91	Desister
George	2.9	Persister
John	2.83	Desister
Max	2.83	Desister
Kyle	2.63	Persister
Kevin	2.54	Persister
Scott	2.5	Desister
Jay	2.5	Desister

Table 7.6 Young people's age of onset and their desistance/persistence

Names of young people	Age of onset	Desister or Persister?
Harry	12	Desister
Gary	13	Persister
Ian	13	Persister
Sam	13	Desister
Max	13	Desister
Kevin	13	Persister
Tim	13	Persister
Rory	14	Persister
Julie	14	Desister
Darrell	14	Desister
John	14	Desister
William	15	Desister
Dale	15	Desister
Alexander	15	Desister
Glenn	15	Desister
Joseph	15	Desister
Adam	15	Desister
George	15	Persister
Scott	15	Desister
Jay	15	Desister
Kyle	15	Persister
Stephen	16	Desister
Dean	18	Desister

These tables illustrate that neither the volume nor the severity of prior offending could predict which young person would desist during and after their participation in employment. There were desisters who committed a high number of offences and of greater seriousness pre-GL involvement. Furthermore, there was no connection between a later age of onset and desistance. Many scholars have purported that earlier ages of onset predict longer criminal careers (Farrington and Hawkins, 1991; Moffit, 1993; Piquero, Farrington and Blumstein, 2007; Soothill, Fitzpatrick and Francis, 2009; Loeber and Farrington, 2012). Whilst acknowledging the fact that actual offending is predicted to be 3–5 years earlier than what is recorded in official records (Theobald and Farrington, 2014), some of the young people with the earliest ages of (official) criminal activity did appear to desist from offending during and after GL participation.

Furthermore, the official offending data did not reveal any connection between the level of criminal involvement in the six-months prior to GL commencement and the eventual desistance of the young person. There was no indication that desisters were those who had already begun to reduce their criminal activities. Tables 7.7 and 7.8 demonstrate this below.

Table 7.7 Young people's offending volume six-months prior to Green Light involvement and their desistance/persistence

	Average number of offences per quarter pre-GL (from onset)	Average number of offences per quarter six months pre-GL	Difference (%)	Desister/ Persister?
Glenn	1.08	5	+357%	Desister
Kevin	0.68	2	+196%	Persister
Dale	1	2.5	+150%	Desister
Max	0.86	2	+133%	Desister
Rory	1.33	2.5	+88%	Persister
Ian	1.94	3	+55%	Persister
Scott	1.71	2.5	+46%	Desister
Darrell	1.11	1.5	+35%	Desister
Harry	0.57	0.5	-12%	Desister
Sam	0.67	0.5	-25%	Desister
Dean	2	1	-50%	Desister
John	2.23	1	-55%	Desister
Kyle	1.22	0.5	-59%	Persister
Julie	0.58	0	-100%	Desister
Gary	1.94	0	-100%	Persister
Tim	0.69	0	-100%	Persister
William	0.67	0	-100%	Desister
Joseph	0.5	0	-100%	Desister
Adam	0.5	0	-100%	Desister
Alexander	0.2	0	-100%	Desister
George	0.83	0	-100%	Persister
Stephen	2.75	0	-100%	Desister
Jay	0.5	0	-100%	Desister

Table 7.8 Young people's offending seriousness six-months prior to Green Light involvement and their desistance/persistence

	Average offence seriousness pre-GL (from onset)	Average offence seriousness six months pre-GL	Difference (%)	Desister/ Persister?
Darrell	3	5	+67%	Desister
Harry	3.25	4	+23%	Desister
Dale	3.86	4.4	+14%	Desister
Scott	2.5	2.8	+12%	Desister
Max	2.83	3	+6%	Desister
Rory	3.92	4	+2%	Persister
Dean	6	6	0%	Desister
Ian	3.14	3	-4%	Persister
Sam	2.25	2	-11%	Desister
Kevin	2.31	2	-13%	Persister
Glenn	3.31	2.6	-21%	Desister
John	2.83	2	-29%	Desister
Kyle	2.63	1	-62%	Persister
Julie	2.71			Desister
Gary	3.79			Persister
Tim	2.91			Persister
William	4			Desister
Joseph	3.2			Desister
Adam	3			Desister
Alexander	3.5			Desister
George	2.9			Persister
Stephen	2.91			Desister
Jay	2.5			Desister

Table 7.7 illustrates that roughly a third of the youths committed more offences in the six months prior to GL involvement, than they had on average since their age of onset. These youths *may* have been becoming more involved in criminal behaviours prior to their employment with the GL. On the other hand, roughly another third of the youths did not

(officially) offend at all in the six months prior to engaging in the GL, suggesting that they *may* have been turning away from crime. Crucially however, desisters could be found in both groups.

Table 7.8 reveals that of those youths who did offend in the six months prior to GL participation, roughly half committed offences of greater seriousness than they would typically commit, and the other half committed less serious offences than they had on average committed since their onset. Again, there were desisters in both these groups, indicating that desisters were not those who were decreasing their criminal involvement prior to GL participation. In fact, there were more desisters in the group who committed offences of greater seriousness in the six months prior to GL involvement, which may have indicated an escalation in criminal activities.

Taken together, the data presented in this section indicates that those who we might have predicted to desist - those with a lesser offence history, with a later age of onset and a decrease in criminal involvement in the months prior to GL involvement – were no more likely to desist than those who we might have predicted to persist. There is no evidence (at least based on official records of their prior criminality) that the desisters in this study were those who were going to desist anyway.

7.3.2. Changing routine activities

When I asked supervisors how they thought engagement in the GL helped young people desist, some described the GL keeping young people occupied during the day and – particularly importantly – separating them from the criminal peers that they would usually associate with. As Fred explained –

“By keeping them busy, and I’m hoping that they are that tired on the night that they can’t go out and reoffend. You know it is hard physical work, it does tire them out so, I don’t think they have got the energy to maybes go out on the night.”

This was affirmed by the young employees themselves, as illustrated in my conversation with Max –

Me: “So you mentioned that the [GL] had helped you stay out of trouble, how did it do this?”

Max: “Yeah, it’s kept me occupied Tuesday to Friday. I’m busy during the day... so by not really going out. Cos when I do go out that’s when trouble happens”

A similar theme appeared in my conversation with Stephen -

Me: “What do you think is making you stop getting in trouble?”

Stephen: “To be honest, this. Keeps me busy, keeps me out of trouble. If I wasn’t doing this I’d literally go out on the streets with them all day and when you are out on the streets you get bored, so that’s when you start doing stuff. So yeah, yeah it has, I’ve spent less time there.”

A number of other young people expressed similar sentiments; they were glad to be busy working and not risking getting involved in offending because of the people they associated with during the day.

Thus, it appears that the causal mechanism supervisors/young people were explaining here was not the ‘meaning’ of the work, or the effect it had upon their self-concept, but rather a different theory of desistance. Laub and Sampson (2003: 135) stated that attention should be paid to the role that life-course events such as gaining employment ‘play in restructuring routine activities’. This perspective draws upon Cohen and Felson’s (1979) routine activities theory to explain that employment may result in desistance simply for the reason that it changes a person’s daily activities in such a manner so as to render criminal activities difficult. As evidenced in this study, a particular routine activity that can be disrupted by employment is deviant peer group associations. It is widely recognised that friendships with offenders can cause delinquency. This is because they provide “definitions” or attitudes favourable to violation of the law and offer more opportunities for offending (see for example Sutherland, 1947; Dishion et al. 1996; Matsueda and Anderson, 1998; Warr, 1998; Capaldi et al., 2001; Dishion et al., 2004; Weerman, 2004; Wright and Cullen, 2004; Richardson and St.Vil, 2016).

The typically ‘close-knit’ social dynamics of the GL cohorts provided some young people with replacement peer groups. Several employees described changing peer groups during their employment. For example, Joseph detailed -

“I’ve worked up to slowly cutting them off and just like fucking off my own way...outside [the GL] I don’t really bother with anyone anymore because I always seem to get myself in fucking shit”.

Thus, being at the GL supplied Joseph with relatively¹⁷ pro-social peers. Indeed, another cohort member - William - encouraged Joseph to go out drinking with him at the weekends. Whilst this might appear to be an example of negative peer influence, these young people were close to being 18-years-old and this is arguably a conventional activity for this age group. Indeed, for Joseph, this was a far more pro-social group than his friends outside who he described dealing and using drugs. Another example of this occurring was at the Landington cohort. As Glenn explained -

¹⁷ See discussion in chapter 6, section 6.3.3.

“I dinnay get locked up with these ones. These are more the friends that you would want to socialise with more. Now I’ve got these pals I can keep away from them and I dinnay get in trouble any more”

This defied the supervisor’s expectations; he was certain that Glenn would reoffend with his best friend who had been released from prison. Yet, his friendships with his co-workers Kevin and John led to a distance with these more actively criminal peers. Therefore, confirming the findings of Wright and Cullen (2004), bonds with co-workers can disrupt previously established delinquent peer networks.

It was not just being occupied and associating with different individuals throughout the day that changed young people’s routine activities, it was also earning a legitimate income. It rendered illegal activities less necessary, reinforcing the assertions of Uggen, Piliavin and Matsueda (1997) about the importance of work programmes supplying adequate income, to prevent offenders resorting to crimes for economic gain. As a supervisor stated – “they’ve got money coming in, they don’t need to go out and steal stuff or deal drugs or whatever”. Furthermore earning a legitimate wage also altered young people’s leisure activities. As Dale’s supervisor described –

“Aye, Dale’s pulled himself through. Cos obviously now he’s getting paid, he’s not hanging around the streets, he’s going out for a pint on a Friday night up the town with his friends. Which I praised him for, rather than just standing around drinking on the streets, getting in trouble, you naw?”

As MacDonald and Shildrick (2007) explain, unemployed youths are denied the purchasing power required to use, or even to get to, other parts of the city (most importantly the city centre) and therefore are for the most part confined to the communities in which they live. Young people working at the GL reported being able to afford to take their girlfriends out to the cinema or for dinner. Moreover, they could drink in a bar or a pub with other friends who were also working during the week. Whilst research has shown that the night time economy in England is a criminogenic environment (Winlow and Hall, 2006; Day, Gough and McFadden, 2003; Hobbs et al., 2005), arguably it is a far more regulated one – by bouncers, bartenders and a routine police presence - than the ‘streets’ or local areas in which unemployed youths would congregate. Hence, the income earned from working at the GL meant that young people could afford to re-engage with society and socialise in regulated spaces.

Overall, this section suggests that employment at the GL helped desistance because it altered young people’s routine activities; who they were mixing with and the type of situations they were involved in were less criminogenic.

7.3.3. The importance of finding meaning

Consequently, as most work would provide an income and keep employees occupied, does this mean therefore that any employment would help desistance? Perhaps it does not need to be the meaningful work I have theorised in this thesis. However, this would fail to explain why not all young people attending the GL reduced their reoffending. During the six-month placement, they all were occupied during the day and obtained the same income. Yet, the resulting changes these had to their routine activities appeared to be insufficient for participants such as Tim, Rory, Kevin, Kyle and Ian who reoffended during their employment at the GL. I sought to clarify this with supervisors, and they implied that the ‘success’ stories were those who found greater meaning in their work. My conversation with Greg illustrated this –

Me: “What distinguishes those the [GL] will work for from those it will not?”

Greg: “It’s the lads and lasses that I don’t have to tell them what to do towards the end... they are not just putting in the bare minimum... They want to work, whereas I’ve had young people on before where they are just there to pick the wages up... it’s the one’s that well, obviously, enjoy it. They are not just using the [GL] to get money or keep out of jail or whatever; they are getting something more out of it.”

Another supervisor, Ross, expressed similar sentiments -

Me: “What distinguishes those the [GL] will work for from those it will not?”

Ross: “It’s quite clear early on... if they’re actually keen or if they’re just there because they think it’s a bit of money or stops them having to do all of their ISS hours, kind of thing... It’s attitude based... and what they want to get from it and whether they really are serious. Because, every young person I bump into at the youth offending team says - ‘oh give me a job, give me a job at the [GL] I’ll be really good.’ But they don’t want a job they want money. It’s those who actually want to do an apprenticeship. And not just be paid money, but to *earn* money. Who can see themselves as potentially, maybe even being their own boss one day”

These statements suggest that it is necessary that offenders find inherent value in their employment if it is to help their desistance. Supervisors describe that only those young people not ‘using’ the GL for their own ends - such as a quick way to get money - but instead were actually open to finding meaning in the experience and a new purpose as a conventional worker would succeed.

The importance of being open to finding meaning in employment is also apparent when comparing the reasons desisters and persisters give for participating in the GL scheme. Desisters described the GL as an opportunity to learn new skills and gain work experience. Whereas many persisters mentioned the remuneration provided by the scheme as a motivation to attend. Moreover, one of the persisters admitted using the GL to reduce his

sentence; attending the employment programme could lead to a more lenient disposal from the courts and particularly could avoid a prison sentence. As a supervisor described -

“All Kyle came on the [GL] for was, he was up on bail at the Crown court, and it was to keep him out of jail; that was his only sole purpose. He was using the [GL], which actually worked. He just turned up and did the bare minimum. He was jumping through hoops because he should’ve went to jail, eh, and it was just all pre-planned, I think. And once he got sentenced for the community order obviously he’s went on the sick for six weeks.”

Therefore, generally, desisters were open to finding inherent value in their employment at the GL; it was an opportunity for learning and self-development. By contrast, many persisters were motivated by the extrinsic benefits of the employment – it could serve to keep them out of prison or provide a temporary income.

Furthermore, how desisters and persisters recounted their experiences working at the GL also indicated that desisters found more meaning in their work than persisters. What desisters described as many of the best aspects of the GL scheme tended to resonate with their criteria for meaningful work outlined in chapter 5, such as their bonds with their co-workers, the praise from the public, participating in manual work and learning new skills. Moreover, desisters valued the GL for introducing them to the merits of a law-abiding life, as this extract from my conversation with Dean illustrates -

Me: “What would you say is the best thing about the [GL]?”

Dean: “Like the opportunity it gives people that emm... have been in trouble in the past to find something... to discover like what else they’d like to do apart from doing bad stuff. Before I didn’t really think of legal as an option but now it’s showed me that there’s actually nothing that wrong with it, if you know what I mean.”

Similarly, Glenn explains –

“It’s made us realise... giving me a job, seeing that there’s another life out there where you’re not getting locked up all the time. You can be free from all that if you work hard”

Conversely, persisters’ narratives regarding the GL were less positive. Although persisters described receiving an income and keeping occupied as beneficial aspects of the scheme, they also complained about the long working hours, getting up early and the toughness of the work. When I questioned desisters about these, they largely accepted early starts and tiring work as normal aspects of employment. As William explained –

“you have to take the rough with the smooth, you get jobs you enjoy and those you don’t enjoy. That’s life”.

Naturally, because many persisters were ‘using’ the GL for its extrinsic benefits, rather than finding value in the experience itself, they were more likely to resent the effort it took to

attain these benefits. Thus, this also indicates that desisters found more meaning in their work than persisters.

This inference may further be affirmed by the fact that those who were desisting had predominantly ‘inherent value’ work orientations. See table 7.9 below:

Table 7.9 Work orientations of desisters

GL employee	Work orientation
William	Inherent value
Joseph	Inherent value
Darrell	Means to an end
Sam	Inherent value
Julie	Inherent value
John	Inherent value
Glenn	Inherent value
Adam	Inherent value
Scott	Inherent value
Alexander	Inherent value
Dean	Inherent value
Stephen	Inherent value
Harry	Unknown*
Dale	Means to an end
Jay	Inherent value
Max	Inherent value

Thus, most of those I considered desisters in this study could perceive a value in their work beyond its pay; as revealed by the lottery question, they would want to keep working if no longer financially necessary. Several of the persisters had ‘means to an end’ work orientations, and consequently valued work primarily for its remuneration, as displayed in table 7.10.

Table 7.10 Work orientations of persisters

GL employee	Work orientation
Gary	Means to an end
Tim	Means to an end
Kevin	Means to an end
Rory	Means to an end
Ian	Unknown*
George	Inherent value
Kyle	Means to an end

*Participant dropped out of scheme before interview with work orientations question could take place

*Participant dropped out of scheme before interview with work orientations question could take place

I initially included the work orientation question in interviews because I wished to understand why participants might consider certain organisational practices meaningful, for the purposes of fulfilling research aim 1. I was therefore surprised to find this correlation between the answers to this question and young people's apparent desistance/persistence. Naturally, the numbers here are too small to make any definitive conclusions. However, in combination with the statements from supervisors and young people presented above, it can be inferred that those who were not using employment for their own ends, but instead found inherent meaning in the experience, were more likely to desist.

However, these findings may contradict what has been stated previously. In chapter 5 (section 5.2.7) I presented findings demonstrating that participants found meaning in the remuneration from their work, because they felt it gave them an adult 'provider' status. Yet, the findings here appear to suggest that those who valued only the pay they received from working at the GL did not find meaning in their work, and consequently persisted in offending. Therefore, a further distinction must be made, and it is apparent in the two quotes from supervisors at the outset of this section. Greg stated that those who were at the GL to "pick the wages up" or "get money" would persist. Likewise, Ross explained that those who wanted to "be paid money" would persist, compared to those who wanted to "earn money", who would desist. Indeed, several desisters discussed the importance they placed upon 'earning' their money, as Stephen detailed -

"I'd like to feel like I'd earned me own money. I dunno, I hate things being handed to us. I know people say they'd love to live the easy life, but I dunnah, I'd rather work for something. At least when you go to work and you buy something you appreciate it more don't yeh? You think it's took all that time and you've finally got this car or this house..."

Similarly, Scott stated –

"I like earning money, I've been given money off me Dad but you don't appreciate money as much as when you earn it"

Thus, those young people who valued their wages because they had *worked* for them, rather than because of the value of the money itself experienced a sense of meaning from their participation in the GL scheme. Supervisors' comments suggest that such individuals were more likely to desist.

These findings highlight the importance not only of an offender participating in employment, but also the individual finding meaning in the experience. All the young people in this study were placed in a work environment that featured organisational practices that

this population had declared to be meaningful. Yet, not all participants were able to discover the necessary meaning in this employment to aid their desistance.¹⁸ Thus, one cannot enter any offender into employment fulfilling the criteria specified in chapter 5 and expect to observe a change in them. They first need to be open to finding meaning. In section 7.4, I discuss the factors that prevented young people having the necessary attitude towards employment. My reasoning here largely follows that of Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph (2002) who state that it is not enough to expose all offenders to a hook for change. There is ‘upfront’ work done by offenders; they must first be willing to embrace change before they would be receptive to pro-social opportunities such as employment. However, I need to be more specific than Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph. It is not just that offenders need to be open to stopping offending, in order for engagement in employment to aid their desistance. The above findings suggest that offenders also need to be open to finding inherent meaning in employment.

7.3.4. Identity reconstruction

Chapter 6 established that participating in meaningful employment at the GL resulted in a strengthening of young people’s pro-social identities. The previous section indicated that those who found greater meaning from their work were more likely to desist. However, what has yet to be established is if there is a connection between identity and desistance. This can be ascertained by comparing the self-narratives of desisters and persisters and considering if there are any notable differences.

Firstly, it should be acknowledged that there were limitations to making generalisations about the narratives of the persisters in this study as the numbers were so small. There were only seven persisters in this study, and at three months into the scheme, narratives could only be collected from six as Ian had already dropped out. By six-months, interviews were only held with four persisters as by this point Tim and Rory had also left the scheme. No comparison between the narratives of desisters and persisters was able to be made at the 12-month interviews, as phone interviews were only held with five individuals, all of whom were desisters (chapter 4 outlines the difficulties in regaining contact with participants).

Despite these limitations, it is apparent when comparing the narratives of desisters and persisters that they are remarkably similar. Desisters and persisters both sought to greater deny responsibility for past offences and separate themselves from these as they progressed through the GL scheme, using techniques such as minimising the crime, citing extenuating circumstances and attaching the blame to others. The self-stories of individuals

¹⁸ This apparent contradiction is discussed further in chapter 8, section 8.3.2.

from both groups altered from being ‘put’ on the GL by the YOT at 0-months, to being an agentic choice to aid their journey towards change by the six month interviews. Furthermore, desisters and persisters made an effort to display a pro-social self in their narratives, for example by drawing boundaries with those perceived to be less pro-social. Yet, contradictory narratives, where they presented both a pro-social and anti-social self within the same narrative, were as much apparent for desisters as persisters. Finally, both groups described legitimate employment as something they desired in the future from the outset and throughout their involvement with the GL. This was even the case for persisters Tim, Ian and Rory, whom I was only able to interview once or twice before they dropped out. Thus, we can observe that for both groups their narratives displayed a largely pro-social self-view from the outset of GL engagement and - for those who did not drop out - this became more coherent throughout participation in the scheme. Thus, participation in the GL impacted upon the identities of both persisters and desisters.

It is notable that persisters displayed reasonably pro-social self-views from the outset and throughout engagement in the GL. Research on the self avers that how one views oneself is a primary factor in decision-making and behaviour; ‘identity’ provides a direction for, and will be consistent with, our actions (Burke and Reitzes, 1981; Matsueda, 1992; Maruna, 2001; Reynolds and Ceranic, 2007). This suggests that persistent offenders would possess a deviant identity. Yet this was not the case for most of the persisters in this study. For example, George declared in an interview in August 2018 that he had grown out of crime and was certain he would not offend in the future. This indicated that at this point he possessed a pro-social self-view. However, less than three months later, he committed several serious robberies and thefts and was therefore imprisoned. Likewise, the timing of Kyle’s offending demonstrates a contradiction between self-narratives and behaviours. Kyle in an interview in September 2018 sought to distinguish between himself and anti-social others –

“John’s more of a party, wild person. He’s up to loads of stuff. Know what a mean?
But not me like, I just like to chill out”.

The use of symbolic boundary drawing in his narratives indicated that Kyle possessed a pro-social self-view at this stage (Presser and Sandburg, 2015). However, just eight days later, Kyle was involved in a joyriding incident, committing several offences. This evidence could suggest that offenders do not always act in accordance with their identity; it is possible to have a pro-social self-view and still commit crime.

Yet, there were two noticeable differences in the self-stories of persisters and desisters. Firstly, persisters described the GL aiding their journey towards change solely

because it ‘filled time’, which gave less opportunities for offending. Desisters, in addition to occupying their time, also mentioned their realisation from engaging in the GL that they could choose another path in life, as a legitimate worker. This resounds with the findings presented in the previous section, that desisters were more likely than persisters to find meaning in their work. Desisters experienced a new sense of purpose from their participation in the GL, as a legitimate worker. Furthermore, this difference could suggest that desisters had a stronger pro-social self-view than persisters. By inferring that the GL only aided their journey towards desistance by keeping them occupied, suggests that without the GL, these young people would return to offending. By contrast, the desisters, in reporting their discovery of another path in life, suggest that they do not believe they will return to offending; they have envisioned an alternative future self.

Related to this, the second difference between the narratives of desisters and persisters was that persisters’ conceptualisation of a ‘future self’ appeared to be less strong. Identity theorists explain that a key element of a desistance-sustaining identity is future goals; the ‘ideal self’ that one is working towards becoming and the ‘feared’ self that they are seeking to avoid (Vaughan, 2007; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009; Presser, 2010). Very few persisters mentioned a feared self in their narratives that they were taking steps to avoid becoming. Moreover, ideal selves were noticeably less concrete for persisters. Most participants reported that their ideal future self would be in legitimate employment. However, some desisters mentioned in the 3-months interviews specific jobs that they could visualise themselves engaging in. Furthermore, by six months nearly all desisters referenced specific jobs they would like to progress into. Many also described steps they had taken towards attaining these jobs. By contrast, persisters’ descriptions of future employment remained ambiguous throughout their participation in the GL. None, even by the six-month interviews, had any concrete plans for their future employment, and they did not describe taking any steps towards attaining work. They had a vague idea of a ‘future self’ as a legitimate worker, but this was not sufficiently specific or compelling to direct their actions towards attaining this goal.

Therefore, whilst employment at the GL appeared to positively impact both desisters’ and persisters’ pro-social identities, it could not aid persisters’ vision of a pro-social future self. This could be because, as demonstrated in the previous section, persisters found less meaning in their work. As they did not experience a sense of purpose as a legitimate worker, they did not therefore envision a distinct future self engaged in a specific type of employment. The fact that persisters’ ‘future self’ was indeterminate may have limited the robustness of their pro-social identity. As Vaughan (2007) and Hunter and Farrall (2018) describe, the future self forms a key part of identity and is vital for desistance. It

encourages particular ways of thinking and acting to align with what ‘that sort of person’ would do. If this future self is somewhat insubstantial in its consistency, this makes it less persuasive. Persisters’ pro-social identity may therefore have been insufficiently strong to compel them to avoid criminal activities. Whereas, as desisters had envisioned a concrete future self engaged in a particular form of work, this may have more greatly motivated them to avoid crime, to ensure they could achieve this ideal self.

Consequently, the findings suggest that the desisters in this study were primarily those young people who found greater meaning in their work and formed a stronger pro-social identity whilst participating in such work. This therefore lends support to the hypothesis of this thesis – that engaging in meaningful employment can aid desistance because of its impact upon offenders’ identities. However, it should also be recognised that engagement in the GL influenced the pro-social identities of persisters too. It did not matter that some of these individuals might not have found meaning in their work; as demonstrated in chapter 6 (section 6.3) it was not only finding ‘meaning’ that influenced identities. Employment at the GL altered the perceptions of others and created social bonds amongst employees, which also impacted upon identities. Thus, participation in ‘meaningful’ work (or at least work featuring the organisational practices specified in chapter 5) can aid pro-social identity construction but still result in persistence. It appears that when considering identity, the visualisation of a law-abiding future self is very important to desistance, as it was primarily this factor that distinguished the narratives of desisters/persisters above.

7.3.5. Overall

The evidence presented in this section demonstrated that the observed desistance during and following young people’s engagement in the GL was unrelated to their prior levels of criminality. Instead, supervisors and young people attributed their desistance to the way in which employment altered their routine activities. Moreover, when the data was analysed further, the role of meaning became apparent. Those who found greater meaning in their employment at the GL were more likely to desist. Narrative analyses suggest that this was because these individuals could better conceptualise a future self as a legitimate worker.

7.4. Explaining persistence

The previous section suggested that young people engaged in employment might continue to persist if they did not find inherent meaning in this work, as they did not develop the necessary pro-social identity for desistance. This section considers why not everyone attending the GL found meaning in the work. It also explores other causes of young people’s

persistence. I refer to the three main themes relating to young people's persistence: their family and friends, the areas in which they live and their lack of stable employment.

7.4.1. Family and friends¹⁹

I acknowledged in chapter six (section 6.3.2) that some family members were proud of the young employees' achievements at the GL. Perceiving that those closest to them recognised and appreciated their attempts to change aided participants' formation of a pro-social identity. However, not all families supported young people's participation in the GL. Moreover, in some instances, relationships with family members hindered young people's engagement in employment and their desistance.

Several of my participants were from families where there was an inherent pro-criminal attitude and where legitimate work was not valued. For example, both of Tim's parents were involved in offending. It stated in his YOT records that he had grown up surrounded by crime and anti-social behaviour and therefore might be desensitised to certain behaviours. Earning an income through crime was normal for Tim, as several of his family members were described as 'career criminals' in his YOT records. Similarly, a supervisor reported that for Kevin, criminality was 'ingrained' in his wider family –

“All his family's offending, his Dad, his Uncles, his grandparents are offending. Stealing stuff to sell, it's a family trait, that's how he's been brought up”.

Kevin's family did not approve of his partaking in the GL programme. Furthermore, Gary's family also had pro-criminal attitudes. Several of his family members had been in prison and were linked to organised crime. Gary's mother had attempted to smuggle drugs to him whilst he was incarcerated. She also actively condoned his crimes and would regularly lie for him when interviewed by the police. As with Kevin's family, Gary's mother did not approve of him engaging in legitimate employment and did not support his partaking in education. Finally, it was stated in Kyle's YOT records that he possessed an extended criminal family. In particular, his cousins were prolific offenders and he had spent time with them since he was a small child. They had actively encouraged him to take part in several criminal ventures.

The participants in this study immediate social network did not only comprise of family members, but also friends too. Bonds with peers could be very strong, as Darrell stated – “me mates are me family”. As with family members, these close friends sometimes had pro-criminal attitudes and did not value legitimate work. Some participants had used their

¹⁹ In this study, only one young person was living in care during the period I conducted my research. He completed the scheme, did not reoffend in the one year I observed him and progressed into employment. However, as this was only a single participant it is unclear whether living in care can impact the relationship between employment and desistance.

friendships with the GL youths to move away from these groups (discussed in section 7.3.2). However, for others it was hard. For example, the supervisor described one of the persisters, Ian –

“He ended up getting in trouble, the people he was hanging around with. He sees his friends as his family and his friends are all, sort of, borderline adult offenders. They are all 17, 18, 19 and they offend, that’s what they do. He’s staying at their house for weeks and weeks at a time, it was too much, it was too hard for him to get away from.”

Often young people wanted to be liked by their peers and so felt compelled to participate in offences to fit in and avoid peer rejection. A few reported that peers criticised their engagement in the GL.

Those participants who were surrounded by such attitudes and behaviours were less likely to find meaning in their work at the GL. The assertions of social learning theorists, such as Sutherland (1947) in his differential association theory, have relevance here. Some young people had been too greatly surrounded by definitions and attitudes favouring deviance, rather than those favouring pro-social activities, to find inherent value in legitimate employment. As the Landington supervisor Greg stated –

“I also think it’s down to the families in all where it’s been ingrained into them, offending, drug-dealing, that is the family trait. Which is sad, but it’s all they know. It’s learned behaviour. And also some parents don’t want kids on the [GL] because it affects the parent’s benefits. So how do you work that one out? Obviously then they are not going in with the right mind-set...”

Moreover, the Telville supervisor Paul explained –

“It’s all down to individuality more than anything else you know – if they see this as a good opportunity for them. If they want to do it, then they can do it, but of course there are certain factors that destabilise that and prevent them having that positive attitude, like their family or peers away from the YOT”.

Furthermore, the Wheatburgh supervisor Fred confirmed –

“I usually find that if there’s plenty family support behind them, that’s the thing that gives them a good attitude towards work... I think it’s better if they have got that family support behind them. And if they’ve got family members working then they want to work as well. It makes a difference if the family have got those values”.

Thus, supervisors from the three different GL sites affirmed that the behaviour and attitudes of the young person’s close social network had an important role to play in determining whether young people would benefit from engagement in employment. The pro-criminal and anti-social values of relatives and friends were so entrenched in some young people that it prevented them from having the necessary attitude to make the most of engaging in the GL scheme. As described in section 7.3.3, it prevented young people from finding inherent

meaning in employment, which limited their ability to form the necessary pro-social identity for desistance.

However, it should be acknowledged that it was always a possibility that a proportion of my participants would not find inherent meaning in working, but instead have a ‘means to an end’ work orientation. Occupational psychologists have found across various demographics that some individuals find intrinsic value in their work, whilst others ‘use’ employment for its extrinsic benefits (Bass, 1985; 1999; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski, 2010; Beadle, 2016). Indeed, research suggests that job attitudes are connected to stable personality traits (Staw, Bell and Clausen, 1986; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Therefore, some young people may not have found meaning in their work even without the influence of the pro-criminal attitudes of their close social network. Those who naturally possessed a transactional approach to working would find the GL had limited utility in aiding pro-social identity formation and desistance.

Some young people, even if they had formed a stronger pro-social identity and reduced their offending behaviours during GL participation, were held back by pro-criminal families and friends who refused to recognise their changed self. For example, the Landington supervisor described Gary having changed significantly since he had engaged in the GL. However, his family were constraining this transformation -

“Gary wants to work. Gary really, really wants to. I know he really really wants to. Like if he got a job that could take him away from his family, but that’s what he wants. And I think he’s struggling with the transition. Sometimes it’s frustrating when you see it and all, and they are trying to draw him back”.

Unfortunately, post-GL, Gary returned to this pro-criminal environment. Not surrounded by anyone who would accept and reaffirm his changed identity, he slipped back into offending. Thus, Gary achieved ‘act’ desistance as he did not commit any serious offences for the six months whilst he was at the GL. He achieved ‘identity’ desistance as his narratives demonstrated a stronger pro-social identity emerging during his employment with the GL. However, he failed to achieve Nugent and Schinkel’s (2016) third stage: ‘relational’ desistance. Those close to him refused to recognise his changed self. This resonates with Presser’s (2016) elucidation, that a key truth about the self is that it is socially constrained; we cannot choose the identities we wish. Despite young people’s efforts to change, they had no control as to whether others would acknowledge their new self. Chapter 6 described that even after six months engagement in the GL, young people’s pro-social identities were incomplete – participants hesitated to say that they would never reoffend in the future or would gain legitimate employment. Thus, young people’s pro-social identities were fragile, and positive reaffirmation by others was very important to sustain these. As King (2013)

found, the positive testimony of others that the individual is desisting successfully is crucial if desistance is to be sustained.

Despite what has been averred above, this is not to say that any young person whose family members or friends were offenders would not benefit from participation in meaningful employment. Where known, 92% of participants lived with known offenders and almost all had been associated with criminal peers at some point, yet only a few persisted in serious offending post-GL. Thus, the *strength* of the bond between the young person and criminal others (and naturally also the level of criminality the friend/relative is involved in) is key. Supervisors described that ‘cutting off’ pro-criminal others was very difficult, if these individuals were relied upon for emotional support. As Ross explained –

“It’s hard. I think sometimes as a youth justice service we are a bit unrealistic when we kind of are almost implying to the young people – ‘look just leave all of your friends and everybody you’ve ever known and make more positive friends and everything will be fine’. Because you could be the most well-adjusted 16-year-old in the world that never offended... they’re not going to do it, never mind the problems that these kids have”

If young people wanted to maintain these valued relationships – which is likely, as experiencing ‘relatedness’ is a fundamental human need (Ryan and Deci, 2002) – participating in more offending is probable and may even be necessary.

Another factor that may have inhibited employment at the GL from aiding young people’s desistance was their unstable home environment. For example, one young person was living with his family in supportive accommodation at one point during his participation in the GL, and the whole family were at risk of becoming homeless. Supervisors informed me that some families faced eviction due to anti-social behaviour and drug taking in the household, they moved house frequently to evade discovery by the authorities for past offences/false welfare claims, and sometimes due to arguments with family members young people would become effectively homeless. Not having a secure ‘home’ naturally made committing to working full-time challenging. Another difficulty some young people faced was living with others who were not working, where consequently there was a lack of routine. Some participants lived in households where family members were playing loud music, drinking and taking drugs until the early hours of the morning. Sometimes young people would arrive at work having had no breakfast and with no packed lunch, as there was no food in the house. This lack of organisation in their home lives made engagement in employment more difficult. As Copp et al. (2019) confirm, family instability, discord and substance abuse decrease the odds that a young person will be successful in areas that traditionally support crime cessation, such as employment. Family members may not be in a position, relative to those without these histories, to provide necessary support.

Indeed, supervisors averred that those young people with more settled home lives were more likely to benefit from their employment at the GL. As Paul from Telville stated -

“So it’s those young people who are coming from more chaotic backgrounds and have a lot more welfare issues or are more vulnerable they are going to struggle to maintain that engagement on the [GL]. As opposed to a young person who lives at home has a reasonably good relationship with their mum or their dad or their carer. That little bit of support that enables them to get to work”

Chaotic family circumstances affected young people’s ability to focus on their employment and receive the benefit of it. As Alexander described –

“If I’ve got family issues I can’t concentrate on ‘owt. If I had family issues I wouldn’t be here. I’d be at home thinking about what the fucks going on.”

Family matters had settled down for Alexander and he was able to partake in the GL scheme, although in the past they had stopped him engaging in school and college. Some young people had to deal with the past and current traumas family members had inflicted upon them, such as being victims of and witnessing domestic violence in the home. Focusing on employment while dealing with these issues was tough.

The evidence presented in this section demonstrates that relationships with family members and peers could prevent employment from aiding young people’s desistance in several ways. Firstly, it could preclude young people from having the necessary attitude upon partaking in the employment. Some were so surrounded by pro-criminal and anti-social values that they were not open to finding meaning in the experience. Instead, they were more likely to ‘use’ the GL for their own ends. They had learnt through their interactions a negative attitude towards certain pro-social activities; their friends and family did not esteem legitimate employment and education. Secondly, those who engaged well in employment and appeared to change their identity and offending behaviours - such as Gary - were sometimes ‘dragged back’ by those around them who refused to recognise this change. They condoned the criminal self, not the pro-social self. Thirdly, during young people’s involvement in employment, some lacked the support of those they lived with to help maintain this engagement, making it more difficult for them to keep attending the GL and fully benefit from it.

7.4.2. Areas in which they live

A number of young people lived in high-crime areas where there were numerous opportunities for criminal activities. Youth justice professionals described these areas as ‘blighted by drugs, alcohol and anti-social behaviour’. Some young people had ongoing altercations with individuals in their communities. As Kyle explained –

“When me cousin was out of jail I used to wind everyone up and when everyone was pissed off we’d go and get in a car and drive off, we’d just sit there and laugh at them cos they wouldn’t dey nowt. But now me cousin’s in jail they all try and get us all the time now.... they trapped us in a flat... and one of them tried to run us over actually”

Indeed, many of the GL employees had been victims of crimes themselves. On one participant’s first week attending the scheme, he was assaulted as the result of a drugs deal; the assault was filmed and uploaded to social media. To survive on such estates young people - males in particular - had to be tough. They had to exert their aggression to preserve their reputation and to protect themselves and this of course would necessarily lead to more offending. To illustrate, it stated in Rory’s YOT records that he was ‘unable to resist the lifestyle and risk taking behaviour he is surrounded by in his community’. Thus, living in such an environment could be a barrier to desistance.

The areas in which young people lived increased the likelihood that they would come into contact with stolen or counterfeit goods and be aware of those who traded in these goods. As Ross explained –

“It’s difficult... no matter how much you try and stay out of trouble, you know, then somebody knocks on your door and says do you want to buy a petrol trimmer for £20 when you know it should be £100. But the second you go yeah you’re handling stolen goods so, and you know that you are so, it’s whether you are maliciously going out and offending or you know, the types of situations you’re going to be in just geographically...”

One young person - Tim - left the GL scheme three months in, because he found selling stolen bicycles and counterfeit goods to be more profitable and easier than his work at the GL. In order to do this he must have had contact with organised criminals. This was despite the fact that, as the supervisor stated – “He was coming on [the GL] at 16 years old and getting £100 per week, not a small amount”. However, stealing bikes did not involve getting up as early as legitimate employment and was more lucrative; if Tim stole one bike a day he could make over £500 a week.

Young people could also make large profits from selling drugs in their areas. For example, William described how prior to commencing the GL, he would purchase £100 of MDMA, take some himself, go to a party and sell the remainder for four times the purchase amount. Thus, Becker’s (1968) economic choice theory has relevance here. If young people weighed up the non-criminal and criminal opportunities available to them to make money, it is likely that latter would consistently render the greatest net benefit. Indeed, Freeman (1996) asserts that the wages from the jobs youths usually hold may not be able to compete with the illegal remuneration that can be obtained from criminal marketplaces where they live. As young people were aware of the illegal opportunities to make money easily, it took a

lot of motivation for them to wake early, to do manual labour at the GL, to ultimately earn less. As Dale explained –

“it’s [the GL] like teaching you not to reoffend and there’s better things to life than going out and doing silly things with your friends but then sometimes you just think fuck nah, you get a lot more money if I went and done that.”

Thus, for young people not to give in to these temptations they needed to be getting something else from their employment beyond its remuneration, to make it worthwhile attending. As explained earlier, not all participants found inherent meaning in their work at the GL, some used it as a means to an end. Those who had this attitude were far more likely to succumb to these easier – though illegal – ways to make money.

It must be acknowledged that young people faced many criminal temptations not solely because of the geographical area in which they resided. There were many people living in these neighbourhoods who did not engage in criminal activities and had no knowledge of the illegitimate market. Indeed, in Johnson et al.’s (2000) and MacDonald et al.’s (2005) research with youths from deprived, high-crime areas in northern England, they similarly reported that many residents had no involvement in crime nor knew anybody who did. Rather GL employees possessed an inherent knowledge of the criminal world because of their social circle. Consequently, this section is somewhat overlapping with the previous one. Others around them - friends, classmates, family members, other relatives, neighbours etc. - had introduced young people to the criminal possibilities available in the area. Revealing this, was the frequency with which participants recognised articles used in the commission of criminal activities when we were out working for the GL. For example, one day when we were litter picking, I came across a police radio. The young people I was working with quickly informed me that this was used in the commission of organised crime, such as drug dealing or commercial robberies, and would have been disposed as evidence. Because of the areas in which they lived, but particularly their social network, the GL employees’ reality was a world full of illegal opportunities to make money that most of society do not perceive. Once young people had this knowledge, they could not unlearn it, it would always be there as a temptation in the background. For those who did not find meaning in legitimate work, this could undermine their desistance.

7.4.3. Lack of stable employment

In chapter 5, I established that one way in which the GL did not fulfil young people’s criteria for meaningful employment was that it only supplied work for six months. This had implications for participants’ desistance. Most young people moved into ‘precariat’ jobs

upon leaving the GL (Standing, 2011). Furthermore, a number were unemployed. Table 7.11 demonstrates this. Aside perhaps from those who gained full-time work as bricklayers and roofers (William, Scott and Stephen), all of the employment mentioned in this table was insecure, low-paid, low-skilled, under-valued work, not fitting much of young people's definition of meaningful employment specified in chapter 5. Moreover, the training programmes and educational courses were little better. Notwithstanding the apprenticeship in bespoke masonry, none presented the opportunity to attain recognisable qualifications that would be required to secure skilled employment but rather were intended as a 'step' towards further education. This resonates with the observation made by Shildrick and MacDonald (2007) and Roberts (2009), that under-qualified, working-class school leavers are usually encouraged onto lower-level vocational qualifications which prove to be worthless in terms of labour market fortunes.

Table 7.11 Employment/education/training destinations of Green Light youths

		Employment/education/training destination
Landington Cohort 1	Julie	Princes Trust course Call centre worker - left Call centre worker - left Bartender - left
	Sam	Valet Cleaner
	Gary	None (reoffended)
	Tim	None (reoffended)
Landington Cohort 2	John	Warehouse Operative
	Kevin	None (reoffended)
	Glenn	Casual construction worker
Landington Cohort 3	Kyle	None (reoffended)
	Dale	None
Telville Cohort 1	William	Apprenticeship in bespoke masonry Casual construction worker Full-time employment as roofer
	Joseph	Unemployed but claiming job-seekers allowance
	Darrell	Agency construction worker – temporary
Telville Cohort 2	Adam	Princes Trust course Interserve training programme
	Rory	None (reoffended)
Telville Cohort 3	Scott	Full time employment as labourer
	Alexander	Uniformed services course - course cancelled Unemployed but looking for work
	Dean	Motor Vehicle Engineering course Waiter – part-time
	Ian	None (reoffended)
Wheatburgh Cohort 1	Max	Sporting Chance training programme Self-employed as roofer
	Harry	Casual construction worker
	George	None (reoffended)
	Stephen	Casual construction worker – left Factory worker – left Full-time employment as roofer
	Jay	Warehouse operative - temporary Warehouse operative - temporary Factory worker - temporary Factory worker – temporary

Although very few of the GL employees moved into meaningful activities, all those who were working or engaged in a training programme were desisting (or at least what I considered desistance – see section 7.2). Those who were NEET following the GL all (with the exception of Joseph and Alexander who were actively looking for work and Dale who was unemployed) reoffended. It is notable that all those who persisted did not progress into

any employment or training. It may be that their reoffending and subsequent disposal (if it was imprisonment or a stringent community order) prevented these youths from gaining employment. However, it may also reiterate the importance of ‘keeping busy’ - even if not engaged in meaningful activities - to desistance.

Several supervisors from the different cohorts lamented that the GL did not provide a ‘next-step’ job for young people, and were worried that without this they would get back involved in crime. Indeed, the official offending statistics outlined in section 7.2.1 demonstrated that once young people left the scheme, their desistance was less pronounced. Supervisors described that both Gary and George, who did not offend during GL participation, might have continued to desist had they been able to move into work straight away upon leaving the GL. However, because they were unemployed, they returned to spending all their hours in a largely pro-criminal environment. Consequently, they both committed several serious offences following the GL, and were imprisoned. As the Landington supervisor explained for Gary –

“he’s got back in to whatever he was doing. But that’s the point of not having a job for him to go into – he just goes back to nothing.”

Likewise, the Wheatburgh supervisor stated that George –

“he’ll have got used to being out and about and working and bits and pieces and then when there’s nothing he’s got bored and got back into knocking around with the wrong crowd again and what have you and just gone back to old ways”

Furthermore, Darrell struggled to gain employment following his time at the GL; he attained the occasional ‘cash-in-hand’ labouring job, but still spent most of his time associating with criminal peers. YOT workers were worried that he would reoffend again and indeed he did commit one offence post-GL although it was less serious than his previous offences. This indicates that gaining stable employment is important for desistance, so that young people do not have ‘work-free gaps’ where they risk spending too much time in criminogenic situations.

Another reason why stable employment was important was that once young people got used to receiving an income, if this was then removed, it could have an adverse effect upon their desistance. Whilst there were positive effects of receiving remuneration (see section 7.3.2. above), there was also some evidence of a negative impact. The Wheatburgh supervisor explained –

“I think possibly one of the biggest things is obviously if they’ve been used to having money in their pocket. Once the money is gone that they’ve been getting from the [GL] then the natural way some of them would think is that well I need some money. And then obviously they might go about it in the wrong way”

This is a disadvantage of employment schemes that provide remuneration. During the scheme, participants get accustomed to the fuller life that having an income allows them to have. When they leave, if they are unable to enter paid employment straight away, they might resort to illegitimate means to pursue the same lifestyle.

Indeed, young people themselves recognised how important job stability was for desistance. As this extract from my interview with John demonstrates –

Me: “How important is it to have a job that is stable?”

John: “Very, very important”

Me: “And why would that be important?”

John: “You’re not out of work you’re not stuck looking for work. These days it’s hard to have jobs that... people do daft things now for money cos they can’t get jobs and they end up getting caught doing daft stuff. They get caught doing bad stuff all cos they can’t get a job. It would be important to have a life contract. People get zero hour contracts where they just get laid off like. I wouldn’t want that.”

This statement by John illustrates that young people were aware of the current economic climate, where work is precarious for many, and the implications this might have for their desistance. As described in section 5.2.8., increasingly for particular social groups, there is no longer any guarantee of lasting employment. Indeed, in this study, the majority of young people either were unable to secure employment/training post-GL or had been through multiple employment/training activities during the six-month follow up. As stated by Schinkel (2015) modern employment, because of its instability, is more of a ‘shakey peg’ for desistance rather than a hook for change.

7.4.4. Overall

Thus, overall, to understand why some young people reoffended, despite their participation in employment, it is necessary to examine their close social sphere. The influence of pro-criminal family and friends prevented some young people from finding meaning in employment. Without this, they were less likely to envision a law-abiding future self – an important element of a desistance-sustaining identity. Furthermore, when young people did not find intrinsic value in legitimate work, they were more prone to the temptations of the many illegal opportunities to earn money that their social network had introduced them to. However, the fact that the GL only supplied temporary employment, and the perilous nature of contemporary labour markets, may also be important in explaining why some young people reoffended. Those who were unable to progress into further employment were more

likely to return to associating with pro-criminal family and friends during the day, causing them again to be surrounded by definitions and attitudes favouring deviance. Even if young people had formed a stronger pro-social identity whilst at the GL, pro-criminal family and friends may not reaffirm this change. Young people's lack of stable employment also made their return to crimes for economic gain more likely, so that they could maintain the fuller lifestyle that having an income allowed them to enjoy.

7.5. Conclusion

In fulfilment of **research aim 4**, I can conclude that participation in meaningful employment aided desistance amongst young offenders. Although not all participants desisted, on aggregate the volume, frequency and seriousness of young people's offending decreased significantly during their employment with the GL, and to a lesser extent during the six-months following this. There was no indication that those young people who displayed reduced criminal behaviours were going to desist anyway within this period. Instead, GL employees and their supervisors attributed desistance to their participation in the scheme. The findings suggest that young people's ability to find inherent meaning in their employment was particularly important when accounting for desistance. This allowed them to better conceptualise a future self as a legitimate worker, sustaining their desistance. Thus, this chapter provided evidence in support of the hypothesis presented at the end of the literature review: that engagement in meaningful employment can aid desistance because of its impact upon offenders' identities.

However, the evidence presented in this chapter reveals that other factors were also relevant in explaining the observed desistance/persistence of participants. It was not only experiencing 'meaning' that impacted upon desistance. Young people and their supervisors put much emphasis upon the role employment played in altering participants' routine activities; who they were mixing with and the type of situations they were involved in were less criminogenic. Moreover, young people's persistence was not solely due to these individuals not finding inherent meaning in their employment. Their pro-criminal social network also played a role, by affirming anti-social, rather than pro-social identities and behaviours. They also exposed participants to many opportunities to earn money illegitimately in their local areas. Furthermore, the short-term nature of the employment at the GL, and the difficulties in obtaining subsequent work, may have contributed to young people's persistence, as it meant that those who did not progress into further employment returned to spending time in places and with people that were criminogenic.

Thus, chapters 5, 6 and 7 have detailed the research findings of this project pertaining to young offenders' conceptions of meaningful employment and the impact of engaging in such employment upon pro-social identity construction and desistance. The following chapter shall draw from these findings the key conclusions of this project and discuss their implications and limitations.

8. Discussion

8.1. Introduction

The three preceding chapters have presented the research findings surrounding young participants' conceptions of meaningful employment and the impact of participating in meaningful work upon their identities and offending behaviours. This chapter seeks to draw these findings together and discuss the key conclusions of the thesis. In particular, I specify how the typology of meaningful organisational practices I have generated has implications for the fields of occupational psychology and criminology. Furthermore, I discuss how the concepts that were the focus of this study - meaningful work, identity and desistance - appear to interact in the findings. By considering this, however, I recognise that this interaction is more complex than initially anticipated and that other - particularly relational - factors play a key role in pro-social identity formation and desistance. The remainder of the chapter acknowledges some of the limitations of this study. Specifically, I detail the extent of the generalisability of my conclusions, why some young people appeared to be unable to find meaning in 'meaningful' work and the potential issues with labelling some young people as 'desisters' and others as 'persisters'.

8.2. Key conclusions from findings

This section shall discuss the key conclusions from the findings presented in chapters 5 to 7. In particular, I will consider the implications of the typology of young people's conceptions of meaningful employment generated in chapter 5. I will also explore the extent to which the findings support the hypothesis of this thesis: that engaging in meaningful employment can aid desistance because of its impact upon offenders' identities. Finally, I shall deliberate upon two underlying themes in the findings: the value of stable work and the importance of inclusion in conventional society.

8.2.1. New conceptions of meaningful employment

The purpose of this project was to enrich desistance research by establishing whether 'meaningful employment' might aid desistance among youths. Yet the investigation into young offenders' conceptions of meaningful employment (**research aim 1**) also has important implications for the field of occupational psychology. As highlighted in chapter 2, research into meaningful employment has mostly been conducted with middle-class, adult professionals. Investigating what constitutes meaningful employment with a different social group to those surveyed previously has revealed the limits of existing literature.

The findings presented in chapter 5 demonstrated that participants had particular criteria for meaningful employment – see table 5.3 for this. There are organisational

practices specified in the existing literature that young people with a history of criminal offending did not rate as particularly meaningful – such as the provision of ‘interesting’ work tasks. There are also organisational practices not specified in the existing literature that young people expressed as giving meaning to their work – such as the provision of outdoor and manual work tasks. Furthermore, even when participants described finding meaning in the same organisational practices as researchers have found with adult professionals, these were sometimes for different reasons. These reasons were particular to their social position as youths from chaotic and impoverished backgrounds with a history of involvement in crime.

Ultimately, therefore, what these findings demonstrate is that occupational psychologists need to survey more diverse groups of employees in their investigations into meaningful employment. Testing the applicability of the typology I drew out of existing literature has revealed its limitations. Due to the unrepresentative sample present research has used - comprising mainly of middle-class, professional adults - it does not fully resonate with diverse groups such as the participants in this study.

Furthermore, the findings regarding young people’s conceptualisations of meaningful employment have implications for the criminological field. Discussions surrounding a certain ‘type’ of employment being necessary for desistance have continued for a number of years. Indeed, the terms ‘meaningful employment’ and ‘high-quality work’ are frequently referred to in discussions of desistance, but are not greatly clarified beyond this (Agnew, 1986; Uggen, 1999; Bushway and Reuter, 2002; Van der Geest, Bijleveld, and Blokland, 2011; Skardhamar and Savolainen, 2014). This study has attempted to specify what young people with a history of criminal offending value in terms of employment, by constructing a typology of organisational practices that they report creating meaning in their work. This thesis should therefore give greater clarity to these discussions, when scholars claim that ‘meaningful’ employment is needed for desistance, the results of this study can give an indication of what form this employment may take. The findings from this thesis also suggest that some young offenders do not find inherent meaning in their employment, as they have a largely transactional approach to working. For such individuals there may be no form of ‘high-quality’ work that could aid their desistance. Therefore, criminologists should not assume that ‘meaningful’ employment exists for every offender, nor that employment will be a suitable hook for change for all offenders.

8.2.2. In support of the hypothesis: meaningful employment, identity and desistance

Occupational psychologists suggest that finding meaning from our employment might influence our identity because it provides a sense of purpose that affects who we see ourselves as (Ashforth, 2001; Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016). Desistance theorists purport that identity reconstruction is crucial to sustain desistance (Maruna, 2001; Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002; Farrall and Calverley, 2006; Vaughan, 2007; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009; Copp et al., 2019). Therefore, at the end of my review of this literature (chapter 3), I hypothesised that engaging in meaningful employment can aid desistance because of its impact upon offenders' identities. I established in chapter 5 that the GL met many of young people's criteria for meaningful employment (**research aim 2**). Thus, I used this employment programme as a case study to explore the accuracy of this hypothesis.

There was clear evidence in the findings supporting the hypothesis. Scholars explain that our identity is based upon our own internal 'self-story' (Maruna, 2001; Dingfelder, 2011; Stevens, 2012; Presser, 2016). The results of the narrative analysis detailed in chapter 6 demonstrated a noticeable (though not dramatic) alteration in the content and construction of young people's self-stories during their employment at the GL. Participants began the GL scheme being open to change. However, as they advanced through the scheme, they described themselves as being on a changed path, a decision which had been aided by their choice to participate in the GL. At the same time, young people sought to greater separate themselves from past offences and negative behaviours. I concluded from this that during their participation in the GL, employees displayed a stronger pro-social identity.

Chapter 6 also explored why identities had developed in this way. Some young people reported finding a meaningful purpose whilst employed at the GL, as a legitimate worker. Participants expressed how learning new skills at the GL and receiving praise from their supervisor for their achievements, made them feel that in the future they could attain legitimate employment and engage successfully with it. In addition, engaging in outdoor manual work at the GL allowed young people to envision themselves as 'adult grafters'. This was a particularly meaningful role to this group because being a 'grafter' fitted with traditional hegemonic working-class ideals of masculinity, such as 'toughness' and 'strength' and 'machismo' (Connell, 1995; Ghail, 1996; McDowell, 2003; Slutskey et al., 2016). Some young people seemed to especially perceive themselves as having a role as a grafter towards the end of their placement at the GL, and I attributed this to the supervisor allowing them to work more autonomously and with less supervision by this stage. Several youths detailed how this helped them to envision a 'new self' as a legitimate worker. Thus, as Pratt and Ashforth (2003) suggested, finding meaning from working influenced

employees' identities. The GL exposed young people to a new way of living, a new answer to 'why am I here?', which in turn impacted upon their answer to 'who am I?'.

Participating in meaningful employment also had an impact upon young people's desistance. As outlined in chapter 7, official records and self-reports revealed that although not all participants desisted, on aggregate the volume, frequency and seriousness of young people's offending decreased significantly during their employment with the GL, and to a lesser extent during the six-months following this. Thus, most young people engaging in the GL were desisting – by reference to the definition of desistance used in this project. There was no indication that those who displayed reduced criminal behaviours were going to desist anyway within this period. Instead, young people and supervisors attributed desistance to their participation in the scheme. In particular, the evidence suggested that the GL 'success' stories were those who found inherent meaning in working and did not just 'use' the GL for its remuneration.

Thus, engagement in meaningful employment aided pro-social identity development and those young people who found meaning in their work were more likely to desist. Further supporting the hypothesis, the findings also demonstrated an association between identity and desistance. The findings indicated that both desisters' and persisters' pro-social identities became more coherent during GL participation. However, when comparing the narratives of desisters and persisters, only desisters described discovering a 'new path in life' as a legitimate worker during their employment at the GL. Furthermore, desisters' vision of a law-abiding future self became more concrete during their participation in the scheme, whereas persisters' description of a future self remained vague. Thus, desisters displayed a stronger pro-social identity during their engagement in meaningful work. This could be because persisters found less meaning in their work. As they did not discover a new sense of purpose as a legitimate worker, they did not therefore envision a distinct future self engaged in legitimate employment.

Therefore, it should be noted that this project has revealed some interesting findings pertaining to young offenders' identities. Maruna (2001) supposed that if the composition of narratives could distinguish desisters from persisters, this might be implicated in the process of desistance. In my study, both desisters and persisters 'reconstructed' their identity during their participation in employment – they both sought to separate themselves from past criminal behaviours and integrated the GL into a story of change. As the vision of a conforming 'future self' was the only notable difference in the self-stories of desisters and persisters, this suggests that this element of identity change may be most important in determining reoffending. Indeed, Vaughan (2007) and Hunter and Farrall (2018) describe

that the future self forms a key part of identity; it gives the individual something to strive and direct their actions towards. If this future self is somewhat insubstantial in its consistency, this makes it less persuasive.

Furthermore, another unexpected finding relating to young offenders' identities was that most young people presented a largely pro-social identity from the beginning of GL involvement and throughout the scheme. Indeed, even persisters when actively offending appeared to possess a reasonably pro-social identity. This contrasts with existing research which would suggest that such individuals would possess a deviant self-view, as scholars purport that our actions are consistent with our 'identity' (Matsueda, 1992; Maruna, 2001; Reynolds and Ceranic, 2007). Moreover, most of those young people who appeared to be desisting still displayed contradictory narratives – where they would include pro-social and anti-social representations of themselves within the same story – suggesting an incomplete pro-social identity. This indicates that an individual's identity does not need to be wholly pro-social for them to desist.

As the pro-social identities of desisters were only partial and persisters possessed a reasonably pro-social self-view even when actively offending, the differences in the identities of these two groups were not dramatic. There was not the clear distinction between the 'redemption narratives' and 'condemnation scripts' of the desisters and persisters of Maruna's research (2001). This may be because the participants in my study were not the extreme desisters/persisters of Maruna's sample, but were mostly somewhere in the middle. Some of those young people whom I classed as desisters were still offending (officially and unofficially) and the persisters in this study, despite continuing with criminal activities, had voluntarily engaged in an employment programme, suggesting that they were at least open to change. My sample was also younger than Maruna's. Most studies of identity and desistance have explored this topic with adults. Although there are limits to the generalisability of this research (see section 8.3.1 below), it may suggest that young offenders do not possess a strong criminal identity even when they are offending. This would affirm the assertion of Walters (2018) that youths are less likely to possess a robust criminal identity because they have not been involved in offending long enough. Interestingly however, my research also suggests that when young people desist, their pro-social self-view is still limited.

Overall, in this study there was evidence in support of the hypothesis proposed in the literature review: that engagement in meaningful employment can aid desistance because of its impact upon offenders' identities. The findings suggest that when an offender finds meaning in their employment, this strengthens their vision of a law-abiding 'future self',

which directs their actions towards avoiding offending. Those participants who persisted in offending were those who found less meaning in their work at the GL and were less able to envision a conforming future self. This reveals the importance of both meaning and identity in the desistance process.

8.2.3. The role of others in meaningful employment, identity and desistance

The findings also demonstrate that young people's relationships with friends, families, co-workers and the public have an important role to play in the interactions between meaningful employment, identity change and desistance.

Meaningful employment influences relationships with others

The data gathered indicates that meaningful employment influenced identity and desistance not only by providing young people with a sense of purpose as a legitimate worker, but by affecting how they related to others, and others related to them.

The findings suggest that it is valuable for pro-social identity development to participate in work that 'does good' for others. Most young people already possessed a reasonably pro-social identity when they commenced the GL. Therefore, participating in meaningful work that had visible benefits for the communities in which it took place overtly displayed this to others. In turn, this identity was reaffirmed by these individuals. For example, chapter 6, section 6.3.2 described how the public would often compliment young people on the work they were doing. Moreover, supervisors would continuously reiterate to employees that the work they did at the GL was a positive contribution to the community. In addition, some young people described their family viewing them more positively and seeing them as a different person since they had been working at the GL. Thus, 'doing good' at work displayed the young person's pro-social self-view to those in their immediate social sphere and to wider society. Young people described seeing their inner self 'reflected back' to them in the eyes of others. This reaffirmation by others may have contributed to a strengthening of their pro-social identity. As psychologists would confirm, the identity bestowed upon the offender by others has an impact upon their own self-view (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1956; Jenkins, 2004; Stevens, 2012).

Section 6.3.3 detailed how participating in work that created close bonds amongst co-workers aided young people's pro-social identity formation. Participants described their relationships with fellow GL youths as supportive. They expressed that because of this, the GL was a safe place to try out a more pro-social self, without fear of ridicule. Moreover, associating with youths who were 'relatively' pro-social (depending on where they were in the desistance process) gave young people credible role models for identity change. Close bonds with the GL supervisor also meant that he served as a credible role model, and aided

young people's conceptions of a future self as a non-offender. Thus, the 'promotes social bonds' aspect of meaningful employment also supported pro-social identity development.

Finally, the evidence presented in chapter 7, section 7.3.2 indicated that having regular work helped young people desist because it altered who they associated with. Supervisors and young people reported that being occupied working during the day meant that they spent less time with deviant peers, reducing their criminogenic effects. Whilst participation in any employment might have reduced contact with deviant peers, only in meaningful employment, where there is a strong sense of relatedness between employees, was there an opportunity for young people to form replacement peer groups, allowing them to distance themselves from criminal peers without undergoing social isolation. This is important as a series of studies describe how desistance can be a lonely existence (Nugent, 2015; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016; Richardson and St.Vil, 2016). Furthermore, earning an adequate income influenced who young people associated with. They no longer needed to 'hang out' on the streets with other unemployed youths, they could afford to socialise in regulated spaces such as pubs, bars, restaurants and the cinema. These spaces were less prone to criminal activity.

Thus, certain elements of meaningful work impacted upon identities and desistance because they influenced how young people related to others in their close social sphere and in wider society. This further demonstrates how meaningful employment can be important for pro-social identity development and desistance. However, it also reveals that others play a key role in how participation in meaningful employment affects identity and desistance. For example, it is not doing work with transcendent benefits that aids pro-social identity development and desistance, but rather the positive reactions *from others* that such work can invoke. Furthermore, although meaningful work can alter the peer-groups that employees associate with, if engagement in such work is to have an effect on identity and desistance, it still depends on new peers being supportive, pro-social role models.

Explaining the persisters: the influence of their social network

Young people's relationships with others were not only associated with their desistance, but also their persistence. The findings in this study resonate with research by Copp et al. (2019), who emphasise that the 'character' of peer and family relationships matter in predicting the odds of desistance. Possessing close relationships with others is not always straightforwardly beneficial for desistance. As MacDonald et al. (2005) highlight, there exists 'destructive social capital'. In this thesis, the values and behaviours of those in young people's close social sphere appeared to affect persistence in several ways.

Firstly, pro-criminal families and friends influenced participants to find less meaning in their work at the GL. Youth justice worker and supervisor reports indicated that for some young people, those closest to them did not value engagement in activities such as legitimate employment or education. Essentially, close friends and/or family members did not ‘buy into the system’ (McGuinn, 2018: 79). These attitudes were entrenched in young people to the extent that it inhibited their ability to perceive the GL as an opportunity for a different life. Instead of their work providing them with a sense of purpose, coherence or significance in their lives (King, Heintzelman and Ward, 2016), they viewed it as a temporary means of gaining money or avoiding prison. Consequently, these individuals were less able to envision a distinct law-abiding ‘future self’, which may have contributed to their continued offending.

Nonetheless, it should be acknowledged that in some instances a participant’s inability to find meaning in their work may not be solely due to the influence of their pro-criminal social network. Some young people may have innately possessed a transactional approach to working, as found by occupational psychologists with non-offending demographics (Bass, 1985; 1999; Breevaart et al., 2014). However, whilst a portion of the non-offending population routinely and successfully engages in employment with a ‘means to an end’ work orientation, this may be detrimental for offenders seeking to use employment as a ‘hook’ for change. The findings in chapter 7 highlight the importance of offenders finding inherent meaning in employment if it is to aid their desistance. Thus, for offenders with an innate transactional approach to work, engagement in employment may not be sufficient to strengthen their pro-social identity and encourage a move away from crime.

Secondly, some participants’ families were unable to provide the necessary supportive home environment to allow young people to engage fully in employment. Supervisors averred that those young people with more chaotic home lives were less likely to benefit from participation in the GL. To successfully engage in employment youths required routine, structure and support at home. Some young people in this project faced insecurity, homelessness, poverty, conflict, drug-use, abuse and neglect in their home lives. These various issues prevented them from engaging fully in the scheme and benefitting from it, particularly in relation to their desistance.

Thirdly, some young people’s close social network introduced them to opportunities for criminal activities in their local areas. These served as a temptation for young people as they often provided an opportunity to earn more money than legitimate work, for

considerably less effort. This was particularly alluring for those participants who did not find inherent meaning in their work at the GL.

Fourthly, pro-criminal family and friends were less likely to reaffirm any pro-social changes young people made during their employment with the GL. Psychologists explain that an individual's private identity can be greatly influenced by their social identity – that is imposed on them by others (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1956; Jenkins, 2004; Stevens, 2012). If those who are most important in an individual's life cannot acknowledge their efforts to change and treat them as a non-criminal, relapse into offending is probable. Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph (2002) emphasised the need for offenders to be 'open to change' before any potential opportunity or 'hook' such as employment could influence desistance. Yet these scholars missed the relational aspect to desistance – those surrounding the offender need to be open to change too. Engaging in meaningful employment can alter the way offenders appear to others – but these 'others' must be willing to accept and reiterate this change back to the individual. As King (2012) states, each individual's social context bounds their identity horizon.

These findings suggest that it is important for desistance to surround an individual with positive social relations – those who value pro-social activities such as employment, who can reaffirm the offender's emerging pro-social identity (the looking-glass self-concept – Maruna et al., 2004) and support the individual's process of change. Engagement in employment can be very important in this, especially if it involves work tasks that facilitate civic reintegration, promotes close social bonds amongst co-workers, provides an adequate income that allows the employee to engage in conventional leisure pursuits and supplies consistent, stable employment that disrupts deviant peer networks. However, the young person's pro-social identity also needs to be recognised by those they are unlikely to part ties with, such as close peers and family members. This allows the individual, even when they are not at work, to be surrounded by those who support and reaffirm a pro-social identity. By creating an environment for the young person to reside in with permanent reinforcement of their pro-social self, a 'delabelling' process can occur (Maruna et al., 2004).

Furthermore, another significant implication of these findings is the importance of changing perceptions on what Nugent and Schinkel (2016) term the 'micro' level (the individual's immediate social sphere). Young people's employment by GL signalled to them that the YOT and GL staff were willing to give them a second chance. Moreover, young people reported feeling that their wider community viewed them more positively because of the praise they received for doing good work in their neighbourhoods. Therefore working at the GL influenced both 'meso' and 'macro' level relations. However, it was the failure to

transform the perceptions of those on the youths' micro level that undermined desistance for some young participants of this study. Thus, the importance of the support of close family/friends should not be ignored. Many scholars, including Nugent and Schinkel (2016), Halsey and Deegan (2015), McNeill (2016) and Menon and Cheung (2018) emphasise the importance of the change in the offender being recognised beyond the family sphere by those in wider society. They state that such experiences mean that the 'new' identity is acted out and affirmed by a wider audience and identity desistance consolidated at a deeper level. Whilst the research findings described earlier support this, the accounts of young people's persistence in this study highlight that transformations in micro level relations are at least as important.

Therefore, the findings outlined in this section demonstrate how those closest to participants could undermine the positive effects of engaging in meaningful employment. This explanation for the persistence of some of the young people in this study suggests that a particular form of 'high-quality' work, which could aid the desistance of any offender, may not exist. Establishing the typology of organisational practices which participants consider meaningful in chapter 5 was very important. It provides clarity as to which elements of employment young people value and how various organisational practices can aid pro-social identity construction and desistance. However, it should be acknowledged that such employment may only be effective for those who are not closely attached to pro-criminal others.

Overall

Research aims 3 and 4 of this study were to assess the impact of engaging in meaningful employment upon young offenders' identities and their desistance process. The findings indicate that engagement in meaningful employment can positively influence pro-social identity development and promote desistance. However, the case study of the GL social enterprise also reveals the importance of this participation in meaningful employment being underwritten by social support if it is to aid desistance. The findings suggest that an individual's social network can either assist, or hinder the relationship between meaningful employment, identity change and desistance. Thus, this research supports the notion that to conceive of desistance as an individual process is incorrect. Those in the offender's immediate social sphere and in wider society play a crucial role in desistance. Sociologist Pierpaolo Donati (2011) asserts that all sociological phenomenon are derived from a relational context and should be conceptualised relationally. Weaver (2012; 2016) utilises Donati's theorising to argue that desistance is a relational process; it is co-produced between individuals-in-relation. It does not just depend on the individual actor's efforts. As Weaver (2016: 250) states -

“Supporting desistance requires going beyond a sole focus on the individual, as if their offending behaviour occurred freely and in isolation, to address the social opportunities that either help or hinder desistance”.

The findings of this thesis confirm this. Engaging in meaningful employment, which changed how young people associated with others, could strengthen their pro-social identity and aid desistance. However, if a young person was too closely bonded with pro-criminal others, this could hinder the process of desistance.

8.2.4. The importance of stable work

Another key theme that emerged from the findings was the importance of stable work. As detailed in chapter 5, many young people considered job stability as the most essential of their criteria for meaningful employment. Participants desired stable work to give them constancy in their often chaotic lives. They also described needing regular work to keep themselves occupied and to avoid dwelling on negative past events.

The data also indicated that stable work was important for desistance. Employment at the GL was temporary; it only lasted for six months. Upon leaving the GL, most young people faced unemployment or ‘precariat’ work opportunities (Standing, 2011). Official offending records revealed that the decrease in offending volume and frequency observed during the six-month follow up was less prominent than during young people’s participation in the scheme. Indeed, some young people who had abstained from offending throughout their employment returned to offending post-GL. Also indicating the importance of stable work is the fact that all the persisters in this study did not progress into employment in the six-months following GL participation. Supervisors averred that even if young people appeared to have changed during their participation in the GL, if they could not find work promptly after leaving the scheme, they could resume offending. This is because they returned to associating with pro-criminal family and friends during the day who did not reaffirm pro-social identities and encouraged further offending. The lack of stability of employment also meant that young people stopped receiving a legitimate income, making them more likely to resort to illegitimate means to pursue the lifestyle they had become accustomed to whilst they were employed.

When discussing the reasons for persistence above, I have emphasised the role of participants’ friends and families. Yet, the temporary nature of employment at the GL and the lack of meaningful employment opportunities thereafter may also be relevant. Some of the persisters (Tim, Rory, Ian) dropped out of the GL mid-way through and continued to offend. However, some completed the programme, though continued to reoffend (Gary, Kevin, George and Kyle). I attributed these young people’s reoffending to their pro-criminal

social circle. Nonetheless, because they only participated in employment for six months, I cannot be sure whether - if this employment had continued - these young people would have eventually desisted, despite the anti-social influence of those outside of work. I cannot tell whether longer engagement in employment might promote identity change and desistance even amongst those embedded in pro-criminal circles. A longer duration of employment may have led these participants to disengage from pro-criminal networks.

Some of the findings in this study might suggest that the stability of employment is in fact more important for desistance than the 'type' of work the individual engages in. Very few participants moved into meaningful activities post-GL (see table 7.11), yet all of those who progressed into some form of employment or training desisted. Furthermore, the one-year interviews indicated that pro-social identities had held²⁰. This was a surprising finding, as most of these activities did not meet any of young people's criteria for meaningful work. However, most young people still hoped to secure meaningful employment in the future (see details in section 6.2.5), which might explain their ability to maintain pro-social identities and desistance when engaging in *prima facie* meaningless work. Furthermore, the employment/training participants engaged in post-GL was very similar to those they engaged in prior to GL involvement (see table 5.1) and of course, young people were offending during this period. Therefore, this might indicate that the 'good effects' of participating in meaningful employment at the GL simply had not worn off yet for these participants engaged in meaningless work. Is it likely that these young people would continue to sustain their construction of pro-social future selves when facing only precariat work opportunities? Only a longer follow-up period would have been able to determine this.

8.2.5. The importance of inclusion in conventional society

Many of the participants of this study emanate from a population frequently termed the 'socially excluded'. Burchardt et al. (2002: 30) define social exclusion thus:

'An individual is socially excluded if he or she does not participate in the key activities of the society in which he or she lives.'

In particular, Burchardt et al. specify that a person is excluded if they are prevented from consuming/purchasing goods and services, if they cannot participate in economically or socially valuable activities, if they are inhibited from social interaction/integration with others and/or if they cannot engage politically. Percy-Smith (2000) provide examples of

²⁰ However, inferences regarding young people's identities post-GL were largely based on the phone interviews I conducted with five participants only. Chapter 4 outlines the difficulties in regaining contact with young people post-GL.

social exclusion indicators such as - job insecurity, workless households, income poverty, homelessness, crime, mental/physical ill-health, educational underachievement and living in areas concentrated with socially excluded groups. As has been illustrated throughout this thesis, the participants in this study possessed many of these indicators of social exclusion.

When scrutinising the conclusions outlined in the previous sections further, it becomes apparent that the young person perceiving that they are *included in conventional society* is vital for identity change and desistance. For instance, the conclusion I present in section 8.2.2 - that finding a sense of meaning from employment impacted young people's identities and desistance - is essentially concerned with this notion of being included in conventional society. Young people ultimately discovered a sense of purpose in their employment because they felt part of the conventional sphere. By successfully completing tasks, learning new skills and receiving praise for their efforts, GL employees perceived that they could function effectively in law-abiding society. Furthermore, being trusted to work independently and carrying out outdoor, manual work was meaningful to participants because they felt they had a role as an 'adult grafter', again suggesting their inclusion in conventional society. Thus, engagement in meaningful work allowed young people to participate in what they saw as a 'socially valuable activity', hence reducing their exclusion, according to Burchardt et al.'s (2002) definition. Moreover, it was feeling included in conventional society through participation in meaningful work that led participants to form the necessary 'pro-social' (see definition in chapter 1) identity for desistance. Young people could find a sense of meaning and purpose from their engagement in crime but this would not aid the formation of a pro-social identity, because crime is not deemed a socially valuable activity by society.

I highlighted in section 8.2.3 how participation in meaningful work influenced young people's relationships with others in such a manner as to support pro-social identity development and desistance. In essence, meaningful employment affected participants' relationships to create a sense of inclusion within law-abiding society. For example, doing good work in the community engendered the compliments of the public. This positive response gave young people a sense of being accepted by wider society. Furthermore, employment that created strong bonds with co-workers, led to social capital built with individuals within conventional society (or - in the case of the GL - offenders who were open to engagement with conventional society). Moreover, the provision of an adequate income allowed young people to greater participate in conventional society and associate more with law-abiding others. Thus, these organisational practices made the individual feel more integrated within conventional society - reducing their exclusion according to

Burchardt et al.'s (2002) definition - and aiding pro-social identity development and desistance.

Meaningful work is therefore particularly effective at connecting an offender to the dominant culture. Maruna (2011) draws on the symbolic interactionist paradigm to argue that a 'ritual of reintegration' might be necessary for desistance. Symbolic recognition by society of the change in the offender would allow them to have stronger belief in their own transformation, hence consolidating their pro-social identity, and therefore aiding desistance. Meaningful work, which encompasses most or all of the nine criteria specified in chapter 5, may be a suitable ritual because the work employees engage in and the way in which they interact with others symbolises their inclusion in mainstream society.

The reasons why some young people in this study persisted in offending also highlights the importance of inclusion in conventional society to identity change and desistance. Firstly, close associations with those who have pro-criminal attitudes and do not value pro-social activities such as education and employment will necessarily increase an individual's social exclusion. Indeed, as observed in this study, such relationships could inhibit participants from engaging fully in employment – thus undermining the potential this had to connect socially excluded young people to conventional society through their participation in socially and economically valuable activities. As MacDonald and Shildrick (2007) identified, it is crucial that young offenders distance themselves – socially and even geographically - from criminal networks if they are to reengage with mainstream society and desist. Secondly, I highlighted above that the transience of the GL employment and the lack of employment opportunities thereafter may have contributed to persistence. This again relates to the offender feeling included in conventional society. If a young person cannot gain stable employment and is routinely 'dropped' by employers, they are naturally less likely to feel that they have a secure place in mainstream society. They are also more likely to return to socialising with other socially excluded youths.

Thus, although the focus of this project was an investigation into how 'meaningful employment' might aid desistance, the findings have also highlighted the importance of the offender perceiving that they are included in conventional society. This assertion finds support in research by Farrall, Bottoms and Shapland (2010), who found that many repeat offenders see the process of desistance as a way of charting a path towards greater social integration in 'mainstream' society. Desistance entails a process of trying to become 'a normal person', a 'good citizen' etc. The findings in this study suggest that what is key to pro-social identity development and desistance is not specifically employment, but rather whom the offender associates with, how they perceive others look upon them and where the

offender feels their place is within society. Engagement in meaningful employment can have a substantial positive impact upon the extent to which an offender feels included in society, but it may not be able to attach offenders who are most embedded in criminal networks - and therefore the most excluded - to the dominant culture.

8.3. Reflections and Limitations

There are naturally limitations to the persuasiveness of these conclusions. Specifically, the extent to which these have relevance beyond the particular case study and participants could be questioned. Furthermore, the apparent contradiction in this thesis – that some participants were unable to discover meaning in employment that this population had described to be meaningful - requires explanation. Finally, the accuracy of the labels I have attached to young people of ‘desister’ and ‘persister’ should be discussed. The subsequent sections consider these matters in turn.

8.3.1. Generalisability

There are limits to the generalisability of the conclusions drawn in this study because of the research design. In particular, the use of the GL as a representation of meaningful employment and the particular choice of participants limit the applicability of the conclusions drawn in this study to other settings.

Using the Green Light as a case study

The conclusions presented in this chapter are based on research conducted using an ‘employment programme’ specifically designed for young offenders to represent meaningful employment. This presents a number of issues.

Firstly, the GL is a somewhat tenuous representation of employment. Young people often worked less than five hours a day, which included the time being driven to the worksites by the supervisor. Furthermore, young people were treated more leniently than an average employee. They could miss workdays and not be dismissed, because supervisors (closely affiliated with the YOT) understood the problems this population faced. As this excerpt from my interview with Ross explains -

Me: “Would any employment have helped these young people?”

Ross: “I think it’s massively down to the [GL] and the staff that are involved. We know what sort of home things go on for these lads. It might be that, over a 6-week period, they might miss a day a week, because of whatever reason, fill in the reason – you know, Dad’s beating Mum up, any of those things, another company’s not going to entertain that, it’s just warning, written warning, final warning, out. And we understand that they have that going on at home.”

Moreover, at the GL, participants were permitted to engage in some behaviours that typically employers would not permit. Simultaneously however, GL employees were more controlled than in normal employment. Working in such small groups, young people's behaviour was continuously observed by the supervisor. In addition, young people received much more support from their supervisor than would be usual of a boss. I observed supervisors helping youths to find extra-curricular activities, secure a tenancy, travel to job interviews, find and attend relevant support programmes and deal with negative peer pressure. Even in workplaces where meaningful bonds are promoted between co-workers, the dedication of supervisors to their employees would certainly not be typical. Furthermore, supervisors actively sought to aid young people's desistance by challenging their perceptions of the public, functioning as positive yet relatable role models and imbuing what otherwise might have been mundane work with meaning. Again this might not be expected otherwise than in an 'employment programme' for offenders.

Thus, the GL is more than simply an employment opportunity; it is also partly a support programme for young people who have been involved in crime. This is of course necessary for these young people because their chaotic home lives, intertwinement with the youth justice system and frequent incidents of educational exclusion means that their distance from the labour market is considerable. These young people require the GL to be an intermediate stage to increase their employability gradually. In addition, because the GL enterprise is closely associated with the various YOTs, young people could receive access to additional support during their engagement in the programme, such as mental health support, housing support, support for drug/alcohol addictions, etc. The implication of this is that I cannot guarantee that employment that met young people's criteria for meaningful employment but did not have these extra supportive features would have produced the same results. If it did not, this would mean that this research does not add to knowledge of the impact of meaningful employment upon identity and desistance but rather the particular supportive environment of the GL. Therefore, fulfilment of research aims 3 and 4 were somewhat compromised in project, because of the particular case study I chose to investigate meaningful employment.

On the other hand, certainly from the young people's perspective, their time at the GL was employment. As described in chapter 6, they classed themselves as 'workers' and many adopted a 'grafter' identity during their six-month placement. Therefore, it may not matter that - objectively - the GL work programme does not represent typical full-time employment. To these young people their time at the GL was a chance for them to 'act out' a new legitimate identity as a worker. The desisters in this study interpreted their experience at the GL as connecting them to the legitimate world of work, and it was *this* that had an

impact upon their identity and offending behaviours. There may be no reason to suggest therefore that other offenders engaged in meaningful work (be it an employment programme or full-time work) would not similarly undergo a change in self-narrative and desist.

Secondly, because the GL was an employment programme provided by a social enterprise, it only lasted for six months. As job security was the most important of young people's criteria for meaningful work, this made the GL case study an imperfect representation of meaningful employment. Had I been able to observe participants engaging in employment that fulfilled all of their criteria I would have been better able to investigate how meaningful employment impacts identity and desistance. Furthermore, as this study examined young people's desistance for a six-month period of participation in meaningful employment and then for a six-month period of primarily meaningless/no work thereafter, it only permitted consideration of how engaging in meaningful employment might aid initial forays towards desistance. It could not predict the long-term effects. Instead of claiming that meaningful employment aids the desistance process, I should be more specific. Participation in meaningful work appeared to aid what Maruna and Farrall (2004) term the primary stage of desistance, though we cannot be sure of its impact on the secondary stage. In hindsight, examination of a longer duration of offenders attending meaningful employment may have been more suitable to investigate research aims 3 and 4 of this study, rather than using a temporary employment programme. It would have made the conclusions stronger and more generalisable. On the other hand, this would not have been possible given the time frame permitted for this project, and therefore may be up to future research to explore.

Participants

The conclusions outlined in section 8.2 were formed based on research conducted with the particular participants in this study. They may not be able to be generalised beyond these individuals because the participants are not representative of all young offenders for several reasons.

Firstly, the number of participants in this study was small and contained only one female and three people who were non-white. Research suggests that women's and ethnic minorities' narratives of change and pathways to desistance may be different (Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002; Calverley, 2009; Glynn, 2013; Fader and Traylor, 2015). I therefore cannot guarantee that participation in meaningful employment would be effective for young female or ethnic minority offenders. Nor of course, that these individuals would have the same conceptions of meaningful employment. Furthermore, all the participants in this study resided in Northern England; I cannot tell whether those from different localities –

both nationally and internationally – would have the same conceptions of meaningful employment or whether engagement in such work would aid their desistance.

Secondly, youth justice workers and supervisors report selecting young people for the GL that they believe will engage with the scheme. This also limits the extent to which I can say that meaningful employment will aid the desistance of any offender. I have only investigated the benefits of meaningful employment with those who have been selected based on their predicted ability to participate well in the employment. Consequently, although most were considered ‘medium-risk’ offenders, there is a possibility that the GL youths may have been more ‘pro-social’ than a typical young offender.

Thirdly, despite being selected for the GL, young people must voluntarily agree to engage with the scheme. The GL is not simply a work programme for young people who have been involved in crime, it is also explicitly a non-offending programme. It is made clear to all the young people that being part of the GL does not just involve attending work every day, it also involves a lifestyle change; a cessation in offending behaviours is expected. Therefore, by making a choice to get involved with the GL, these youths were at least open to changing their offending behaviours. As stated by Bushway and Apel (2012: 34) -

‘individuals who voluntarily enrol in, actively participate in, and successfully complete, employment training programs differ from those who refuse to participate or drop out, mostly in ways that are difficult to measure and are independent of program effects on behaviour’

Thus, those young people that choose to engage in the GL may have a pre-existing amenability to change. This again might suggest that participants were more pro-social than the average youth offender.

Incidentally, because the young participants of this study engaged voluntarily in meaningful employment, I cannot claim that ‘meaningful employment’ can aid identity change and desistance. I can only purport that *voluntary* engagement in meaningful employment can aid identity change and desistance. Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph (2002) found that it is not enough to expose all offenders to a hook for change. There is ‘upfront’ work done by offenders. Internal readiness to change affects receptivity to social hooks for change. I stipulated in chapter 7 that young people needed to be open to finding meaning in employment for it to aid their desistance. It may be also that the young person needs to be open to changing their offending behaviours. There is an extra cognitive process here, which could be crucial. I cannot tell from my findings the importance of the voluntary aspect to the success of meaningful employment in promoting pro-social identity formation and desistance as all my participants were engaged voluntarily in meaningful employment.

Yet, despite the concerns regarding the representativeness of participants detailed above, it should also be acknowledged that the number of youths entering the youth justice system is decreasing (Taylor, 2016). Consequently, the participants of this study still represented a significant proportion of the youths under the supervision of the various YOTs at the time of this research. For example, in Landington, participants represented approximately 9% of all medium risk, 16-18 year old YOT service users during the period of my research. Indeed, supervisors informed me that the GL youths were - overall - very typical of the young people that attend the YOT.

Overall

The generalisability concerns outlined above do not undermine the value of this thesis. Lewis et al. (2014) state that generalisation involves three different types of inference: representational generalisation, inferential generalisation and theoretical generalisation. This study may not be able to achieve representational generalisation because, as highlighted above, the young participants might be more 'pro-social' than the parent population of young offenders from which they were drawn. This project might not attain inferential generalisation because the conclusions might not apply to offenders from outside Northern England or to other employment schemes for example. However, this study could accomplish theoretical generalisation, as the theoretical propositions contained in the findings may have a more general application. As iterated by Yin (2018: 20), case studies - such as the one used in this thesis - are generalisable to theory, not to populations or universes. The case study is an opportunity to empirically elucidate theoretical concepts and principles.

For example, whilst the criteria for meaningful employment I found in this study may not resonate with all young people with a history of offending, by investigating it with my participants I have highlighted that the occupational psychology literature needs updating to include the views of more diverse groups. In addition, I have drawn attention to that fact that criminology literature needs to be more specific about the type of 'high-quality' work that it purports to aid the desistance of offenders. Criminologists should also not assume that all offenders will find inherent value in this work. Furthermore, while I cannot guarantee that any offender who participates in meaningful employment will form a more coherent pro-social identity and desist, I hope that the tentative links I have generated between these concepts will lead to more research in this area (discussed further in the next chapter). Naturally, it is important to understand *what* can aid desistance, and the connection between employment and desistance is routinely cited in the literature (Sampson and Laub, 1993; Mackenzie and De Li, 2002; Farrall, 2002; Wright and Cullen, 2004; Savolainen, 2009) but it is also important to understand *how* it aids desistance. The detailed investigation

I have conducted in this thesis, examining how different organisational practices influence social relations, self-views and participation in criminal activities highlights the complexity of the employment – desistance relationship. The findings from this study can therefore be used to inform theory regarding how employment influences desistance.

8.3.2. Failing to find ‘meaning’ in ‘meaningful’ work

In chapter 5, I outlined participants’ conceptions of meaningful work and established that the GL fulfilled most of this criteria. However, in chapter 7, I explained that one of the reasons some young people persisted in offending despite participating in the GL scheme was because they failed to find inherent meaning in the work. This apparent contradiction requires explanation.

A possible reason for this was that I had wrongly inferred that what young people were describing as ‘meaningful work’ was the ‘type’ of employment provided by the GL. However, I considered this unlikely. I determined that the GL was meaningful work not from my own evaluations, but because many of young people’s examples of meaningful organisational practices were based on their experiences working on the scheme. It was clear therefore that young people were describing many of the organisational practices of the GL as meaningful.

When scrutinising the data further, I believe that this contradiction exists because the criteria for meaningful work generated in chapter 5 were mainly based on desisters’ opinions. I was aware when conducting my thematic analysis of the data pertaining to young people’s conceptions of meaningful employment that I had based the typology upon which organisational practices a number of young people described as important. However, I was not aware until later examining that data relating to participants’ desistance/persistence, that these ‘number of young people’ were in fact mostly the desisters. Indeed, it can be observed that very few of the extracts from interviews presented in chapter 5 arose from interviews with persisters. Nearly half of the persisters dropped out of the scheme mid-way through and therefore naturally fewer interviews were held with these individuals. Furthermore, the persisters in this study were often those young people who were the least communicative during interviews. This appeared to be particularly the case when examining meaningful work. Had they been more vocal, I might have earlier been able to detect that for some youths, there were unlikely to be many organisational practices that would give them a sense of meaning in their lives. This is because they approached work transactionally, rather than finding inherent value in employment.

Consequently, experiences of meaningful employment are subjective. It is insufficient to place an individual in a work environment that those similar to them have

declared to be meaningful. A young offender may fail to find meaning in employment regardless of how meaningful other young offenders have declared it to be. This is therefore another reason why the criteria for meaningful employment established in this study may not be generalisable to all offenders.

8.3.3. Issues with claiming desistance/persistence

In this study I split the young participants into two groups: the ‘desisters’ and ‘persisters’. However, attaching these labels to young people may be problematic.

Firstly, how to divide between these groups is a contentious and essentially subjective decision. As Bottoms et al. (2004) specify, individuals oscillate on a continuum between conformity and criminality. In this study, there were young people at (relatively) polarised ends of this continuum – such as those who did not officially offend in the 12 months I surveyed them, and those who committed very serious offences and were imprisoned. Dividing these individuals into desisters/persisters may not be as controversial. However, there were many individuals in the middle, such as Rory and Kevin, who each had an offending incident both during the programme and in the follow-up period. These were of roughly the same seriousness as those they had committed before. I labelled these individuals both as persisters. Furthermore, there was Darrell and Adam, who each committed one offence in the follow-up period, which was of a lower seriousness than those they had committed before. I labelled these individuals as desisters. Moreover, Max committed more offences than he would typically commit whilst he was employed at the GL, however, he did not offend at all in the six-month follow up and therefore I considered him a desister. These labels were in accordance with the chosen definition of desistance for this thesis - as the process of abstaining or refraining from criminal activity over time, rather than the complete cessation of offending activities (also the definition used by Fagan, 1989; Maruna, 2001; Bushway et al., 2001; Bushway, Thornberry and Krohn, 2003). However, others may have chosen to define the ‘desisters’ and the ‘persisters’ in this study differently and this may have altered how these ‘middle’ offenders were divided. This necessarily would have led to a different understanding of the data.

Secondly, some may contend that one year of reduced seriousness offending (official and unofficial) is insufficient to claim that an individual is a desister. This may just be an intermittent lapse in serious offending; it does not guarantee that the change will continue. Farrington and Wikstrom (1994) warn that short follow-up periods can result in misleading findings. The intermittent character of offending patterns may lead to the illusion of desistance. Scholars who defined desistance as the complete cessation of offending have followed their participants for 18 years (Kurlychek, Bushway and Brame, 2012) or 25 years

(Morizot and Le Blanc, 2007) to ensure that they had desisted. In addition, a series of studies demonstrate that it is only after approximately 7-10 years of non-offending that the risks of an ex-offender reoffending are the same as those of a non-offender (Kurlychek, Brame and Bushway, 2006; Blumstein and Nakamura, 2009; Soothill and Francis, 2009; Bushway, Nieuwebeerta and Blockland, 2011; Weaver, 2018). Although I was not looking to observe complete non-offending from the desisters in this project, these findings indicate that the follow-up time in this project may be insufficient to claim that desistance is occurring. A follow-up period of this duration was necessary however given the time restrictions placed on this research.

Thirdly, the participants in this study were so young, that labelling them as ‘desisters’ may be unwise. On average, young people were 18 years of age when I had completed my six-month follow-up. Any event could occur in the future to reverse their desistance process. Indeed, Gary’s experience, where he demonstrated a significant change in attitude and offending behaviours during his placement, yet was later ‘dragged back’ into offending by his peers and family members, reveals how fragile young people’s process of desistance was. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that most participants moved into *prima facie* meaningless work post-GL. Without the organisational practices that give young people a sense of purpose as a legitimate worker and influence their social relations to support a pro-social identity, continued desistance may be difficult. Whilst my six-month follow up did not demonstrate this - all the young people who were working (even in meaningless work) appeared to be refraining from serious criminal activities (see table 7.11) - how accurate this is with a fairly short follow up is questionable. Only a longer follow-up period could determine whether pro-social identities would hold and the avoidance of serious criminal activities would continue.

Fourthly, there is a possibility that the young people in this study that I labelled as ‘persisters’ may reduce their criminal activities in the next few years, as they move from adolescence into adulthood. The age-crime curve demonstrates that typically criminal offending peaks in mid to late adolescence (see Delisi (2015) for an overview). Moreover, desistance is characterised by lapses and relapses (Weaver, 2016). To judge these young people based on their offending activities for only six-months after participation in the GL may be unfair, its effect could be delayed. Thus, it may be argued that this project had too narrow a time-frame to justify attaching the label of ‘persister’ to these participants.

Overall, I cannot guarantee that those young people who I have labelled as ‘desisters’ will never commit any more serious offences, nor would I wish to aver that those who I have labelled as ‘persisters’ will always offend. Nevertheless, I believe it was

necessary (even if these are only operational labels) to separate young people into desister and persister groups to greater understand how individuals participating in the same ‘high-quality’ work may have different outcomes. There is a notable divergence between young people who - for a 12-month period - reduce their involvement in crime to non-serious, infrequent offending, and those who continue or increase their level of offending. Indeed, most of the persisters were eventually imprisoned. Dividing participants into these groups allowed me to compare their experiences of meaningful employment, consider any differences in how they constructed their identity and assess other factors – such as the influence of their peer groups and home environments.

8.4. Conclusion

This chapter discussed the conclusions that can be drawn from the findings in this project. It revealed that, by generating a typology of young people’s criteria for meaningful work, both occupational psychologists and criminologists should review their understandings of meaningful employment. Furthermore, support was found in this project for the hypothesis that engaging in meaningful employment can aid desistance because of its impact upon offenders’ identities. However, the interaction between meaningful employment, pro-social identity formation and desistance is made more complex by its intertwinement with relational factors. Young people’s social networks can both support and hinder the relationships between these concepts. Ultimately, what appears to be most important for pro-social identity construction and desistance is that an individual feels that they have a role in and are accepted by conventional or law-abiding society. Employment that meets young people’s criteria for meaningful work can be very important in this; however, it may not be able to connect those who are most heavily embedded in pro-criminal social networks to the dominant culture. This chapter also discussed the potential limitations in this project. It acknowledged that whilst these conclusions may not be applicable to all offenders or alternative settings, they make an important theoretical contribution. Furthermore, it clarified that the apparent contradiction - that some participants were unable to discover meaning in employment that this population had described to be meaningful – was due to the criteria for meaningful employment being mostly based upon the conceptions of desisters. Finally, I analysed the reliability of the labels I attached to young people of ‘desisters’ and ‘persisters’ and concluded that although unavoidable in this project, the time-frame may have been too narrow to fully justify these. Continuing from this discussion, the final chapter shall provide a conclusion to this thesis, considering the potential policy implications of the findings and identifying where future research could be undertaken.

9. Conclusion

9.1. Introduction

In the final chapter of this thesis, I establish how the research aims of this study have been fulfilled and acknowledge other key findings from the research. Moreover, I consider the implications of these research findings for policy makers, criminal justice practitioners, third sector organisations and society generally. Furthermore, I outline where, based on the findings in this study, future research could be conducted. Finally, this chapter provides a conclusion to the thesis.

9.2. Summary of key conclusions

The previous chapter discussed in detail the key conclusions in this thesis. This section shall summarise these. It will also clarify to the reader the unique contribution to knowledge this project has made in the areas of meaningful employment, identity and desistance.

Meaningful employment

In fulfilment of **research aim 1**, ‘To establish young offenders’ conceptions of meaningful employment’, I ascertained that young people with a history of justice involvement have specific criteria for meaningful employment. Young people find meaning in employment that ‘does good’ for others, offers opportunities for personal achievement and learning, allows for self-determination, creates bonds between co-workers, provides outdoor manual work tasks, supplies an adequate income, and is secure. Participants’ criteria differed from what existing research on meaningful employment has found, studies mainly conducted with adult professionals (see table 5.3). Therefore, the findings in this thesis have implications for the field of occupational psychology. This thesis has identified the limited applicability of present scholarship surrounding meaningful employment; it does not fully resonate with groups beyond the adult professionals that have typically been surveyed in this field.

The criteria for meaningful work established in this thesis were mostly based upon the descriptions of the desisters in this study. By contrast, the persisters predominantly approached work transactionally and did not describe an inherent value in employment. These young people’s close bonds with pro-criminal others may have influenced their opinions of the merits of legitimate employment. However, it is also possible that some individuals innately held a ‘means to an end’ work orientation. Therefore, it should be acknowledged that whilst the criteria for meaningful employment specified in table 5.3 may resonate with some young offenders, others may not be able to conceive of how they might find ‘meaning’ in legitimate employment.

In fulfilment of **research aim 2**, ‘To investigate the extent to which the GL social enterprise fulfils young offenders’ criteria for meaningful work’ I established that the GL scheme largely met young people’s criteria for meaningful employment – the exception being that employment at the GL was not secure/stable, as it was only provided for six months. Table 5.4 illustrated this. Therefore, the GL was a suitable case study to explore the impact of engaging in meaningful employment upon identity and desistance.

Many young people, when describing what gave employment meaning, used examples from their work at the GL. However, again, these articulations mainly arose from the desisters in this study. The persisters largely did not describe the GL employment as meaningful. Articulations from supervisors and the young people themselves indicated that these youths tended to ‘use’ the GL for its remuneration, rather than finding inherent meaning in the experience. However, this does not suggest that a different form of employment might have been meaningful to persisters. Rather, as articulated above, the findings indicate that these young people approached legitimate employment transactionally, at least at this point in time.

Identity

To investigate **research aim 3**, ‘To assess the impact of engaging in meaningful employment upon young offenders’ identities’, I conducted a detailed narrative analysis of the content and construction of participants’ self-stories at various intervals during their employment at the GL. I observed that throughout young people’s participation in employment, their pro-social self-narrative became more coherent. However, most possessed a largely pro-social identity before they commenced the GL, and even after GL involvement, it was not absolute. I established that engaging in meaningful employment can strengthen a pro-social identity by several means. Firstly, participating in manual work, learning new skills, receiving praise for their achievements and self-determined working gives young people a sense of meaningful purpose as a legitimate worker, allowing them to envision a future self within the conventional sphere. Secondly, engaging in work that ‘does good’ for local communities gives young people the opportunity to experience their actions and themselves labelled as pro-social by others, strengthening their pro-social self-view. Thirdly, the relatedness that meaningful work creates among co-workers is important for pro-social identity development as this can provide support and role models for identity change.

Engaging in employment at the GL appeared to have a positive impact upon the pro-social identities of both desisters and persisters in this study. However, when comparing the narratives of desisters and persisters, only desisters’ vision of a law-abiding future self

became more concrete during their participation in meaningful work. Persisters' description of a future self remained vague. This could be because persisters found less meaning in their work. As they did not discover a sense of purpose as a legitimate worker, they did not therefore envision a distinct future self engaged in legitimate employment.

This thesis therefore makes an important contribution to the criminological literature regarding identity and desistance. Most studies of identity and desistance have explored this topic with adults. The narrative analysis suggested that the young desisters in this study did not possess fully pro-social identities, yet still reduced their criminal involvement. The young persisters had reasonably pro-social identities despite their continued offending. Indeed, what distinguished the identities of desisters and persisters was that desisters envisioned a stronger conforming 'future self'. Thus, the difference between the identities of young desisters and persisters may not be as dramatic as existing research has found for adults, and for youths the imagining of a conforming 'future self' may be the element of identity that has the greatest impact upon desistance. Furthermore, this thesis indicates that the current understanding of how offender identity relates to criminal behaviours may be too simplistic. Our identity is assumed to be consistent with our actions, inferring that persistent offenders would possess a deviant identity. Yet, the findings in this study suggest that it is possible to possess a pro-social identity and still offend.

Desistance

In considering **research aim 4**, 'To determine the impact of engaging in meaningful employment upon young offenders' desistance process', I observed that most participants reduced their involvement in serious offending during and after their participation in the GL scheme. Thus, most young people engaged in employment were desisting – by reference to the definition used in this project. There was no indication that those participants who displayed reduced criminal behaviours were going to desist anyway within this period. Instead, young people and supervisors attributed desistance to their participation in the scheme. In particular, the evidence suggested that the GL 'success' stories were those who found inherent meaning in working. These individuals formed the necessary identity for desistance. The findings from this case study therefore support the hypothesis presented at the outset of this thesis, that engaging in meaningful employment can aid desistance because of its impact upon offenders' identities.

Criminologists continue to assert that only a certain 'type' of 'high-quality' employment may aid desistance. This thesis has ascertained that engagement in 'meaningful' employment can aid young offenders in developing a stronger pro-social identity and desisting. However, some youths approach employment transactionally and

consequently do not find inherent meaning in employment. This makes it less effective as a hook for change for these individuals. Therefore, it cannot straightforwardly be averred that 'meaningful employment' is the necessary high-quality employment for youth desistance; experiences of meaning are subjective. Thus, for some young offenders there may be no 'type' of work that could aid their desistance.

This thesis also establishes that it is important for young offenders to have supportive relationships with pro-social others during their engagement in employment, if it is to influence desistance. These individuals can support young people to find meaning in their work and can reaffirm pro-social identities, strengthening young people's pro-social self-view. By contrast, close bonds with those who have pro-criminal values, who do not value legitimate employment, can undermine the potential positive effects of engaging in meaningful employment.

The findings also suggest that the 'stability' element of meaningful employment is particularly important for desistance. Official statistics demonstrated that young people's desistance was less pronounced in the six months after they left the scheme. Moreover, all those who persisted in offending post-GL did not progress into further employment when they left the programme. Instead, persisters returned to spending most of their time in criminogenic environments with pro-criminal others, some of whom did not recognise pro-social identities and instead encouraged criminal attitudes and behaviours. Thus, stable work is important to disrupt deviant peer groups and criminal associations. Stable work is also important so that offenders can maintain a legitimate income and therefore are not tempted by the criminal opportunities for economic gain in their local areas.

When scrutinising the findings in this study further, they indicate that the offender feeling included in conventional or law-abiding society is ultimately what is important for desistance. This supports research that emphasises the role social exclusion plays in criminal offending. The findings of this thesis suggest that what is key for identity change and desistance is not specifically employment, but rather whom the offender associates with, how they perceive others look upon them and where the offender feels their place is within society. The meaningful organisational practices specified in table 5.3 in various ways serve to promote the offender's inclusion in society. However, the findings in this study indicate that engagement in such employment may still not be able to connect those who are most embedded in pro-criminal networks - and therefore the most excluded - to mainstream society.

9.3. Implications of research findings

I began this thesis by proclaiming the importance of understanding desistance to inform criminal justice policy. This study has investigated desistance among young offenders and therefore has important implications for policymakers and others. In particular, the findings demonstrate that it is important to provide meaningful employment for youths, to connect young offenders to positive social networks and to promote inclusive societies. The following sections shall consider each of these in turn.

Meaningful employment for young offenders

The findings suggest that participation in meaningful employment is beneficial for desistance among young offenders. Whilst young people did not become ‘model citizens’ from their engagement in meaningful employment, a reduction in the severity of offending and the establishment of a more coherent pro-social identity was observed in most. Furthermore, the case study of meaningful employment utilised in this project had benefits for young people beyond aiding their desistance. The GL promoted friendships among youths with similar histories of involvement in offending. Moreover, it increased participants’ confidence and enhanced their social skills. In addition, young people reported that working outside and participating in manual work had boosted their mental wellbeing. Thus, there are clear benefits for young people to engage in meaningful employment, and policymakers should seek to facilitate this.

However, ensuring that more young offenders participate in meaningful employment may be a challenge. As highlighted in chapter 5 (section 5.2.8) due to deindustrialisation and neoliberalism, an increasingly significant portion of the workforce are employed in ‘precariat occupations’. Scholars such as Winlow and Hall (2009) and Standing (2011) assert that such work is unstable, low-paid, low-skilled, mundane, socially isolating and prevents the formation of an occupational identity. Moreover, Simpson, Hughes and Slutskaya (2016) report that such employment is increasingly service work, which relies on deference and customer handling skills – what they refer to as the feminisation of local labour markets. This stands in sharp contrast with young people’s criteria for meaningful work specified in table 5.3. Young offenders, because of the barrier of the criminal record (Weaver, 2018) and their (typical) lack of qualifications, are destined to reside in the precariat population. In both Telville and Wheatburgh, supervisors reported that for manual, outdoor jobs that participants might find meaningful - such as landscaping or roofing - employers were looking for applicants to have GCSEs and clean records. It should be acknowledged therefore that this thesis was somewhat idealistic from the outset. In investigating the benefits of participation in meaningful employment, it assumed that young offenders could obtain such employment.

The complex economic factors that have led to the formation of a precariat workforce and a decrease in meaningful employment opportunities may be difficult or even impossible for policymakers to reverse. Thus, instead it may be more practicable for policymakers to facilitate the provision of meaningful employment ‘schemes’ similar to the GL. These meaningful employment schemes should encompass the nine organisational practices young people deemed to be meaningful as much as possible, as it was demonstrated in this study that these had a positive impact upon pro-social identity development and desistance.²¹

In particular, the findings in this project suggest that it is important that such schemes provide stable employment – this could be achieved in several ways. Firstly, it would be preferential for employment programmes to last for more than six months. The fact that the GL only supplied employment for six months may have contributed to the persistence of some participants, who did not reoffend during the scheme, but returned to serious offending when it ended. Indeed, in a GL scheme not included in this research project employment is provided for one year, due to the complex needs of the offenders they employ. A longer period of employment might have allowed participants to form a stronger pro-social identity, which greater supports desistance. It also may have helped participants to find inherent meaning in work and disengage from pro-criminal networks. Secondly, the aim should be to promote a stable transition from meaningful employment scheme to meaningful full-time work. Therefore, employment schemes should involve participants gaining recognisable qualifications while they are working so that they can progress beyond precariat work to more skilled meaningful employment after the scheme. Promoting connections with employers might be useful also, as some young people at the GL had to rely on their own resources to find subsequent work. Unfortunately, this was limiting because most of the people they knew were unemployed or precariat workers themselves. Similar findings have been found by Morris (1995) and Shildrick and MacDonald (2008). Thus, young offenders will require significant support to progress into meaningful work. However, this is important to ensure that the processes of pro-social identity development and desistance from offending do not regress.

However, politicians may be wary about funding meaningful employment schemes. Although these schemes would be for those who have already completed their sentences, and not a disposal following an offence, they may give the appearance of being ‘soft’ on crime (Welsh and Farrington, 2002). Furthermore, providing meaningful employment for offenders may be particularly contentious as an increasingly large percentage of the law-

²¹ Acknowledging however the limitations to the generalisability of these – see section 8.3.1, chapter 8

abiding public are struggling to obtain such work. It may be difficult for politicians to justify providing such opportunities for what Uggen (1999) terms the ‘least deserving members of a large and needy underclass population’, even for the purpose of reducing reoffending. On the other hand, a positive move recently in the UK was the Ministry of Justice’s New Futures Network (NFN), which functions as an employment broker to connect employers and prisons. To date, more than 500 businesses have registered to offer work to former prisoners (White, 2019). Such has been the success of the scheme that the government has changed the rules of Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) to allow offenders, following a risk assessment, the opportunity to work and train with employers while serving their sentence (Ministry of Justice, 2019). These positive reforms could indicate that the government may be willing to fund meaningful employment schemes, as they clearly recognise the gains to be made from engaging offenders in employment.

It would be preferable if work schemes were provided by state organisations and third sector organisations working in partnership. The GL involved the third and public sectors working together to provide meaningful employment for offenders. Whilst it was incorporated as a social enterprise, it had a strong association with local YOTs. This had many advantages in terms of providing the necessary support for young offenders who often had multiple issues that needed addressing beyond their employability. On the other hand, being a social enterprise and not part of the YOT ensured that the GL work was differentiated sufficiently from the work of the community reparations team to allow young people to perceive that this was ‘employment’ rather than a punishment. For the participants, it was a chance for them to ‘act out’ a new legitimate identity as a worker in the conventional sphere.

In the UK, there is an increasing policy emphasis on mixing public, private and third sector providers to deliver innovative services, following the Transforming Rehabilitation reforms. Unfortunately, the most recent UK Justice Policy Review (Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, 2019) reveals that this has not happened in practice. Furthermore, following the poor results of Community Rehabilitation Companies, plans are set for the National Probation Service to take back control of all offender management services in 2021 (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2019). However, the justice secretary, David Gauke, reports that the private sector and third sectors will still play a part in the provision of services. Indeed, a fund of £20 million a year will be set aside for particularly innovative new approaches. Thus, how future criminal justice policy in England progresses will determine how viable meaningful employment schemes for offenders may be.

Based on the findings in this study, I would recommend that such schemes were not funded by a payment-by-results method, which is becoming increasingly common in the public sector. This is where providers for criminal justice services are paid according to whether they meet certain measurable outcomes, such as an offender's cessation of criminal activities for a set period (Ministry of Justice, 2013b). In this study, only 52% of young people did not (officially) commit any offences during their participation in the GL or in the six-month follow-up thereafter. Yet my figure for desistance was 70%, as I sought to observe in participants a gradual decrease in criminality. The changes in young people's identities and offending behaviours in this study were relatively small, although notable. As stated by Barr (2018) where the focus is on a binary measure of results, it does not recognise incremental moves towards desistance. If offenders have not ceased offending this does not mean that they or the programme are a failure. Most of my young participants did not want to get in serious trouble again; however, they were not committed to a fully law-abiding lifestyle either. Those who define desistance as the cessation of criminal activities fail to capture the complexity of a move away from crime. Furthermore, the GL not only affected young people's criminality. Participation in the scheme had many other positive effects for young people; it improved their quality of life. This 'impact' of the programme is less easily measured.

Promoting positive social networks

The findings in this thesis demonstrate that the positive reaffirmation by others of the changes young people are trying to make is important for desistance. Thus, it is imperative that young offenders have strong relationships with pro-social others so that this endorsement of their pro-social identity can occur. As Weaver (2013) states, criminal justice practitioners have a role in supporting the development or maintenance of a person's positive social relationships with friends and family as well as engaging them as part of the change process. These networks of support can be important assets in desistance.

The findings from this study also suggested that participants whose close social network was pro-criminal found it more difficult to engage in and did not greatly benefit from meaningful employment. Supervisors informed me that having such ties with pro-criminal individuals was typical for many young people who were involved with the YOT. Thus, the deleterious effects of such bonds may inhibit the desistance of other young offenders beyond my participants, and therefore need to be addressed. An advantage of creating meaningful employment 'schemes' is that in addition to providing employment, they can incorporate extra supportive elements for young offenders. For example, at the GL, the very small work groups meant that supervisors could help young people with some of the other issues they faced in their lives. At the same time, however, the GL still offered an

opportunity to experience employment and learn new skills. Potentially the balance between ‘employment scheme’ and ‘support scheme’ might need to be negotiated depending on the participants. Those with pro-criminal family and friends, whose connections had greatly distanced them from the labour market, might benefit from a scheme more focused on providing personal support. Such a scheme would need to tackle the issues they had with the negative influences in their lives before it attempted to enhance the young people’s employability. The providers of the scheme may need to work with family members/peers as well as young people to address their negative attitudes towards legitimate employment. As Copp et al. (2019) argue, it is important that desistance programs consider the impact relationships with anti-social families and peers has upon change. There may be identifying characteristics that a young person would require a programme more focused on support. For example if a young person has family members involved in organised crime or is a member of a self-proclaimed ‘gang’, this may indicate that they have strong ties to pro-criminal individuals.

The providers of the support/employment programme could use various methods to help young people make more positive connections. For example, they could facilitate young people’s involvement in pro-social recreational pursuits to encourage the formation of pro-social networks. Indeed, some supervisors attempted this at the GL. The providers of the support/employment programme could also encourage bonds between the young attendees of the scheme. For example the GL brought offenders who were open to change together to work in a supportive environment. As revealed in this study (see chapter 6, section 6.3.3) the bonds generated between young people provided support for identity change and desistance. The idea of ‘mutual aid’ has found considerable support within the desistance literature (Nugent, 2015; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016; Weaver, 2013; 2016; Weaver and McCulloch, 2012). However, this study also revealed that those most embedded in pro-criminal circles did not abandon these, despite forging new connections at the GL. Perhaps, had the programme lasted longer than six-months, the bonds between young employees would have strengthened to the extent where young people could distance themselves from more negative influences in their lives. Support/employment schemes could therefore strive to provide pro-social replacement peer groups for young offenders.

However, in some instances if young offenders are to distance themselves from negative peers and form pro-social networks, they may need to change their geographical location. Some young people in this study expressed their concerns about not being able to ‘get away’ from the negative influences in their lives. Therefore, it might be beneficial if employment/support schemes could work together with housing services to consider the feasibility of moving those most embedded in deviant peer groups or gangs to other

locations. They could also explore the possibility of those who live with other criminals moving to independent accommodation. This is another reason why it might be advantageous for the third and state sectors to work collaboratively to provide employment/support schemes.

Inclusive societies

The findings in this thesis suggested that inclusion within conventional society is important for young offenders' pro-social identity construction and desistance. There is much that policy makers can do to promote inclusion within society. Indeed, they need to recognise their role in influencing public perceptions of young offenders. The current risk management ethos in the public sphere conveys a negative message: offenders are a potentially dangerous population that needs to be controlled for the protection of the public. By contrast, desistance research portrays offenders as fellow citizens, who may be at various stages of the reintegration process into society. Thus, a policy focus upon enabling and encouraging desistance would send a message of optimism to the rest of society: offenders can change and become valued members of society. A desistance-focus ensures that offenders are portrayed as ordinary people – they are humanised and still included within conventional society. Moreover, as McNeill et al. (2013) aver, criminal justice agencies have a role to play in publicising examples of success to demonstrate that positive change is possible, and is indeed common. Certainly, more attention needs to be brought to the fact that most young offenders will not persist into adult offending.

Furthermore, policymakers need to acknowledge that the way in which young offenders are punished results in their exclusion from legitimate society. McNeill (2019) states that punishment leads to social disintegration – by locking individuals away or controlling them in their homes. Thus, there needs to be post-punishment methods of reintegrating young offenders into society. As demonstrated in section 8.2.5, participation in meaningful work is particularly effective at connecting an offender to the dominant culture. Therefore, the provision of meaningful employment schemes would aid inclusion for young offenders.

However, post-punishment reintegration may be ineffective unless policymakers recognise the detrimental effect having a criminal record has upon a young person's ability to participate in legitimate society. A recent review of the disclosure of youth criminal records in England and Wales concluded that the current system adversely affects young people's access to employment, education, housing, insurance and visas for travel (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2017). Its exclusionary effects prevented young people moving on with their lives and acted as a barrier to rehabilitation. Their overall

recommendation was a change in the criminal records disclosure system, including the reduction of rehabilitation periods under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974. They also suggested that all employers delay the point at which job applicants have to disclose criminal convictions, allowing them to be judged primarily on merit.

Furthermore, to aid post-punishment reintegration policymakers could consider introducing ‘Certificates of Rehabilitation’, as is done in certain states in the US, to indicate to employers and others that an offender has reformed. Alternatively, policymakers could consider the French system of ‘judicial rehabilitation’. This effectively wipes clean the record any offender, regardless of the extent of their criminal past, providing they can adequately display to a court that they have reformed. Indeed, a person must demonstrate that they have become a ‘near perfect citizen’ (Stacey, 2015). As McNeill (2019) argues, what is needed is a process of ‘formal, legal ‘de-labelling’ where the status of the citizen is reinstated’. Such a practice would signal to the young person and the rest of society that they are reinstated as a member of law-abiding society.

Thus, there are ways society can attempt to reintegrate young offenders after they have served their sentences. These methods of inclusion may aid pro-social identity construction and desistance. However, it must be acknowledged that tackling exclusion within society is complex. The findings in this study demonstrated the existence of those with pro-criminal attitudes, who did not value legitimate employment or education. Participants who were closely associated with these individuals found their pathway to desistance more difficult. The reasons why certain groups end up excluded and display anti-social, pro-criminal behaviours and values are associated with larger structural changes within society. For example, Shildrick and MacDonald (2008), in their research with socially excluded youths in northern England, attributed their exclusion to the massive economic restructuring and de-industrialisation since the 1970s, the rise of insecure work in place of traditional working-class employment and related inter-generational, downward social mobility. Such structural processes cannot easily be tackled by policy makers. These exclude swathes of the population from being able to fully participate in mainstream society and realise a full human potential (Percy-Smith, 2000). As stated by McNeill (2019:17), ‘offending breaks relationships and tears at the social fabric, but the fabric is torn because it is weak and worn thin by these other wrongs’.

9.4. Future Research

This project was largely exploratory, and therefore the findings reveal many opportunities for future research. For instance, the young participants’ criteria for meaningful employment

(see table 5.3) could be tested with other young offenders to establish its veracity. Specifically, it may be useful to examine conceptions of meaningful employment with offenders from areas in the UK outside of Northern England. Different work contexts where youth employment is more or less available may influence ideas of meaningful employment. Furthermore, including youths of different ethnic backgrounds might provide more insight into how different groups conceptualise meaningful work. This study was predominantly conducted with white, male, working class youths. However, it is likely that ideas of 'work' and 'meaning' are influenced by cultural norms. Consequently, it would also be useful to consider the extent to which the criteria for meaningful employment established here apply to young female offender populations as well as males. There was only one female in this study, and therefore it was difficult to determine whether young female offenders would also find meaning in outdoor manual work. This would not traditionally be considered 'women's work' (Williams, 1989; Britton, 2000; Odih, 2007; Smith, 2013).

Thus, using a larger and more representative sample of young offenders might allow scholars to form a robust typology of meaningful organisational practices for young people with criminal justice involvement. This could then be quantitatively affirmed. However, it may be that there is no single conception of meaningful employment among young offenders; it may differ depending on the locality, ethnicity or gender of the individual. Nonetheless, this knowledge could inform interventions with young offenders; as this study demonstrates, engagement in employment that participants consider meaningful can be beneficial for desistance. If meaningful employment schemes are what is required to tackle youth reoffending, it is very important that we first fully understand what youths consider to be meaningful employment.

It would also be useful for future research to explore further the finding in this study that not all young offenders find inherent meaning in employment and the factors that can create such attitudes. GL supervisors suggested that pro-criminal families and friends play a key role in shaping young people's attitudes towards legitimate employment. However, it may be that some participants naturally approach working transactionally, as has been found in research with non-offending populations (Bass, 1985; 1999; Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski, 2010; Beadle, 2016). Indeed research in occupational psychology suggests that job attitudes are connected to stable personality traits (Staw, Bell and Clausen, 1986; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Further research here is crucial, because if it is the case that some young offenders would never find inherent meaning in employment because of their natural disposition towards working, then the provision of meaningful employment schemes for such individuals may be of little value. Instead, they may need an alternative 'hook for

change' that they experience as meaningful - such as a recreational or religious activity - that might therefore impact upon their identity and offending behaviours.

The hypothesis that engaging in meaningful employment can aid desistance because of its impact upon offenders' identities has thus far only been investigated using the single case study of the GL social enterprise. It is very important therefore that future research tests this hypothesis using other employment schemes, or other instances where young offenders engage with meaningful employment, to establish its utility. Do these offenders' pro-social narratives become more coherent as was observed with the young people in this study? Do they also refrain from serious criminal activity? Is the role of others as crucial to the relationships between these concepts as was found in this study? Furthermore, as recognised in chapter 8, the GL was also partly a support programme and not representative of full-time employment. Without exploring other examples of meaningful employment, I cannot be sure of the extent to which the extra supportive elements of the GL scheme contributed to young people's identity change and desistance. Moreover, testing this hypothesis using examples of offenders engaging in employment in different localities is important. In particular, an international comparison might be useful. It may only be in western neoliberal societies that employment can be so significant to young people's identities.

In addition, as acknowledged in the discussion chapter, this project surveyed young people for a six-month period of participation in meaningful employment and then for a six-month period of primarily meaningless/no work thereafter. This meant it could consider the impact of meaningful employment upon initial forays towards desistance, but it could not predict the long-term effects. Future research could consider investigating the effects of young people participating in meaningful employment for a greater period of time, and conducting a longer follow-up of their offending behaviours.

Finally, I hope that future research will explore whether meaningful employment schemes are effective in promoting desistance amongst adult offenders or particular groups of offenders, such as sex offenders or cyber criminals. The young people in this study predominantly committed street-type crimes that tend to be prevalent among traditional working-class communities. Whether other types of offenders would consider outdoor manual labouring to be meaningful work and whether such work would aid their desistance is unclear. Indeed, existing scholarship is mixed as to whether work programmes for sex offenders can be effective (Beech et al. 1998; Brown, 2011; Hudson, 2015).

9.5. Conclusion

As stated at the outset of this thesis, the present youth justice system - through commendable practices of diversion - contains primarily the most persistent and troubled offenders (Taylor, 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this thesis was to greater understand what can aid desistance for these young offenders. The GL case study highlights the importance of young offenders engaging in ‘meaningful’ employment. The findings suggest that meaningful employment can aid desistance because it assists the formation of a stronger pro-social identity. However, there is a possibility that not every individual will find meaning in work, as some may approach employment transactionally, rendering it less effective as a hook for change. Furthermore, it is important that young offenders have support from pro-social others when participating in such work, if it is to have an impact upon their identity and offending behaviours. The detailed investigation I have conducted in this thesis, deconstructing meaningful employment into various organisational practices and examining how these influence social relations, self-views and participation in criminal activities, therefore highlights the complexity of the employment – desistance relationship. Ultimately, this thesis indicates that the offender perceiving that they are included in conventional society is important for pro-social identity development and desistance. Engagement in meaningful employment can be an effective method of connecting a young offender to mainstream society.

Consequently, the findings of this project have important implications. This thesis indicates that an effective way of supporting desistance among young people is to provide - once they have completed their sentences - access to meaningful employment schemes. Ideally, these should offer a mixture of work opportunities and individual support for at least one year. Work opportunities should meet young people’s criteria for meaningful employment. Furthermore, the providers of the scheme should aim to ensure that participants attain the necessary qualifications and access appropriate social networks so that they can progress into meaningful full-time employment at the end of the programme. Such schemes could be provided by third sector and state organisations working in partnership. Alongside the provision of these schemes, policymakers need to do more to tackle social exclusion, as the findings in this study reaffirm that this can inhibit desistance.

However, I acknowledge that before such programmes for young offenders could be implemented, more research may be required. How robust is the criteria for meaningful employment I created in chapter 5? What approach is most suitable for young people who approach work transactionally? How important is the balance between employment and support scheme to youth desistance? It is vital that future research answers these questions,

to provide greater guidance for those seeking to address youth reoffending through the provision of employment.

Appendix A – Information sheets and consent forms

A.1 Information sheet and consent form for Green Light supervisors

Research Project

Northumbria University would like to conduct a research project that examines how the [GL] social enterprise can change the lives of young offenders. It has already been found that the reoffending rates of those young people from the Youth Offending Team (YOT) that attend the [GL] are less than those who do not. It is now important to figure out why this is, in the hope that this knowledge can be used to help other young people.

My name is Rebecca and I will be carrying out this research. In particular I will be focusing on:

- What type of work do [GL] employees value? Does the [GL] meet this criteria?
- Does being part of the [GL] change the way young people see themselves? Does it change how others see them?
- How can work support desistance?

This sheet helps answer questions you might have about this research. Once you've read the sheet, or talked about it with me, you can decide whether you'd like to take part or not.

What will happen as part of the research?

I will be attending some of the young people's workdays with the [GL]. I will be observing the young people working and chatting to them and yourself about the work they are doing.

I will also ask if you want to take part in an interview with me at the YOT near the end of the cohort's placement with the [GL].

Why do you want me to take part?

I'd like to know your opinions on how engagement with the [GL] might impact upon the young people and their journeys away from crime. As a [GL] supervisor I believe you will be able to provide invaluable information for my research.

What if I don't want to take part?

That's no problem. It's up to you to decide if you want to take part.

What if I change my mind?

If at any stage during my research you change your mind about taking part, that's no problem, just let me know.

Will you record things that I say?

When I am out observing the work of the [GL] I might write down things you are saying or doing but just ask and I will show you these notes at any time. Anything you are not happy with can be abandoned.

If we meet for an interview at the YOT I might ask you if I can record it – but if you prefer I can take notes instead.

Will anyone know I've taken part in the research?

No, I will always use pseudonyms when writing up this research and I won't include any information that could disclose your identity.

How do I know that you're going to keep my information safe?

Paper notes will be stored in a locked cabinet at Northumbria University and electronic data, such as recordings/interview transcripts will be stored in either the University's or the YOT's secure storage area. It is a condition of the University's approval of this project that I keep your information safe.

What's going to happen after you've done all this research?

I will write up all the information I've found out into a report (thesis). Let me know if you would like to read this - I can give you a copy. There is a possibility that some of this research may be published in the future – but again pseudonyms will be used and no-one will be able to identify that it was you who took part.

Once I have finished my PhD and allowed time for any subsequent publications (approx. September 2021) I will shred and delete all the information I have about you.

OK, I think I want to take part

Great, just sign on the next sheet. You should keep this information sheet, just in case you have any questions.

I want to know more about the research

I will be happy to answer any questions and you can contact me at rebecca.oswald@northumbria.ac.uk

I want to complain about the research or report something I'm unhappy with

Please let me know if you have any complaints. Alternatively you can contact Sarah Soppitt who is my supervisor at Northumbria University, her email is sarah.soppitt@northumbria.ac.uk

Research Consent Form

Name of project

Exploring the desistance process of young offenders in a case study of the [GL] social enterprise

Organisation(s) initiating research

Northumbria University

Researchers' names

Rebecca Oswald

Research Organisation

Northumbria University

Participant's name – write your name in here

1. I confirm that I have been supplied with and have read and understood an Information Sheet for the research project and have had time to decide whether or not I want to participate.
2. I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.
3. I agree with Northumbria University recording and processing this information about me.
4. I understand that this information will only be used for the purposes set out in the information sheet.
5. I have been told that any data generated by the research will be securely managed and disposed of in accordance with Northumbria University's guidelines.
6. I am aware that all tapes and documents will remain confidential with only the research team having access to them.
7. My consent is conditional upon the University complying with its duties and obligations under the Data Protection Act.

I would like a copy of the report when it's published

	Please tick
Yes	
No	
I'll decide later	

Signature of Participant (even if below 18 years old)

Date

--	--

Signature of Parent/Guardian/Representative

(if participant is under 18 years old)

Date

--	--

I can confirm that I have explained the nature of the research to the above named participant and have given adequate time to answer any questions concerning it.

Signature of Researcher

Date

--	--

A.2 Information sheet and consent form for Green Light employees

Research Project

What is it about?

My name is Rebecca and I am from Northumbria University. I would like to do a research project that looks at how the [GL] can change the lives of young people.

I will be trying to find out:

- What do you like/dislike about working at the [GL]?
- What sort of work would you like to do in the future?
- Does being part of the [GL] change the way you see yourself? Does it change how others see you?
- Does the [GL] help you keep out of trouble?

What do I have to do?

I will come along to some of your workdays with the [GL] to take part in the work you are doing and chat to you about it.

I will ask you if you would like to take part in some short interviews with me during your [GL] placement. These will be either at the YOT or onsite when you are working.

I will ask you if it would be ok for me to collect information from your Youth Offending Team (YOT) records.

I will contact you six months after you finish your placement for a chat about how you are doing.

What if I don't want to take part?

That's no problem. It's up to you to decide if you want to take part.

What if I change my mind?

You can leave the research project at any time - just let me or your supervisor know.

Will you take notes or record things I am saying?

Yes, I might sometimes write down things you are saying or doing but just ask and I will show you these notes at any time. Anything you are not happy about can be scrapped.

If we meet for an interview I will ask you if I can record it – but if you are not happy about this I can take notes instead.

Will anyone know I've taken part in the research?

No, I will always use false names when writing up this research and I won't write any information that could risk other people knowing it was you.

Everything you tell me will be confidential, including if you tell me about an offence you have committed. However if you told me something that made me think you or someone else might be in serious danger, I would have a duty to report this to your supervisor.

How do I know that you're going to keep my information safe?

I'm going to keep any information about you in a safe place – in either a locked cabinet or a safe place on the computer. No one other than me will be able to get to it.

What's going to happen after you've done all this research?

I will write up all the information I've found out into a large report – called a 'thesis'. Let me know if you want to read this - I can give you a copy. There is a possibility that some of it may be published in the future – but again there will be no way that anyone could know it was you who took part.

Once I have finished my research and allowed time for any other publications (about September 2021) I will shred and delete all the information I have about you.

OK, I think I want to take part

Great, just sign on the next sheet. If you have any questions just ask me.

I want to complain about the research or report something about the research I'm unhappy with

Let me know if you are not happy. Or if you let your supervisor know they can pass on your worry to Sarah Soppitt who is my supervisor at Northumbria University.

Research Consent Form

Name of project:

[GL] research project

Who is doing the research:

Northumbria University

Your name:

I confirm that

1. I have read and understood the information sheet
2. I am happy for the researcher to access my YOT records
3. I understand I don't have to take part and I can leave the project any time without needing to say why.
4. I agree with Northumbria University having this information about me.
5. I understand that this information will only be used for the purposes in the information sheet.
6. I am happy that my information will be kept safe and deleted when no longer needed
7. I only give this consent if the University complies with its duties and obligations under the Data Protection Act.

I would like a copy of the report when it's published

	Please tick
Yes	
No	
I'll decide later	

Your signature (even if below 18 years old)

Date

Signature of Parent/Guardian/Representative

(if participant is under 18 years old)

Date

I can confirm that I have explained the nature of the research to the above named participant and have given adequate time to answer any questions concerning it.

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix B – Interview and observation schedules

B.1 Observations Schedule

What type of work is this?

Does this work represent 'real' employment?

Skills required?

Who benefits from this work?

How many hours do young people work?

Do they act as workers?

Desistance

Do you hear young people say that they are offending? Supervisors say that they are offending?

Do you hear young people talk about drug use/other deviant activities?

Evidence of any deviant/anti-social behaviours during the day?

Re-configuration of identity

Pay attention at pre-employment interviews - why are young people wanting to take part?

Do they seem keen/enthusiastic for the work? Or are they playing it cool? Are they motivated?

Do young people have a motivated work attitude, do they try their best?

Are they just 'going through the motions'?

Do they muck around? Or take it seriously?

How do young people's attitudes/behaviours change throughout the program?

How does what they say and the way they speak change throughout the placement?

Do they refer to themselves as a worker/employee?

Do they refer to themselves as an offender/criminal?

Do they refer to the [GL] as work?

When are they treated as a worker? Do supervisors encourage this?

When are they treated as an offender? Are their previous offences ever mentioned?

Are they treated like adults or children?

How much responsibility are young people given, how do they react to being trusted?

Can you see young people testing out different identities?

Are achievements recognised?

Can you see young people growing in confidence? Improved social skills?

Do young people seem safe and relaxed at the [GL]?

Other's perceptions

Do they mention what other people think about the work they are doing?

How do young people react when other people see them working?

How do members of the public respond to seeing the young people working?

Do young people engage with members of the public?

Meaningful work

Is the work they do always high-quality meaningful employment? Does it fit the criteria specified in the literature?

What do young people say about the work they are doing?

Do the young people seem interested in their work?

Do young people learn things?

Do they take pride in their work?

Do they get to display their work?

Note any examples of praise/achievement

Are the ideas of the young people incorporated into the work they are doing?

Are young people trusted with dangerous tools? Or is there still a mitigation of risk? What risk management tools are used with the [GL]?

Is there much focus on risk?

What forms of work do young people have positive reactions to?

What forms of work do young people have negative reactions to?

Can you see young people shaping their work to make it more meaningful?

Peer influences

What are the group dynamics? How close is the [GL] group? Do the young people get on, have a laugh etc?

Do they become friends?

How much influence do they have on each other's behaviour? Are the young people helping/supporting each other to change?

Do they encourage pro-social behaviour? Does it create a pressure to conform to desistance?

Do they encourage delinquent behaviour? Do the young people act up? Are they egged on by each other?

Do interactions with other young people help form identity? Do they encourage, support, praise each other? Or do they bring each other down – reinforce a negative identity – don't want to appear too keen, or the swot? Does this change throughout the program?

Is there a working hard or mucking around social pressure at the [GL]?

Is there a hierarchy in the group? Someone they all seem to follow?

Relationships with supervisor

How much of a bond do young people seem to have with their supervisors?

How do the young people and supervisor interact?

Is there a lot of respect towards the supervisor?

Does the supervisor befriend the young people?

Do young people show ambivalence to taking on prosocial identities, do supervisors help reinforce these?

Examples of supervisor going beyond being their boss?

B.2 Interview schedule – Green Light Employees 0 months

1. What brought you to the [GL]? What's your story?

What were you doing before?

Why did you decide to do it?

Past offending?

2. How do you feel about being chosen for the [GL] above other young people from the YOT?

Why do you think you were chosen?

3. What do you want most in your future?

Jobs? Offending?

What would you like to change?

4. What's the best thing about the [GL]?

5. What's the worst thing?

B.3 Interview schedule – Green Light Employees 3 months

Initial experiences with [GL]:

1. How's the work been going so far?

What sort of things have you been doing?

2. Are you going to college as well? What are you learning there?

Do you think it will be interesting?

3. Do you think the work you are doing is important?

4. Would you say any of the work you are doing is interesting?

Which type of work do you prefer?

Co-workers

5. Do you get on with the other young people?

Would you say you're friends or just work together?

6. Is there a leader in the group?

Who? Why?

7. Are the other young people seem quite similar to you? How much do you have in common?

8. Do you have friends outside the [GL]? Are the [GL] people like your friends outside?

9. What about the people at college? What are they like? Do you see any of them out of work?

10. How do you get on with the supervisor?

Other people

- Do you live with your family? What do family think of you doing the [GL]?
- What do your friends think of you doing the [GL]?
- What do strangers think when they see you out working?

Future job

- What sort of job would you like to do in the future?

Unpack – why this job? What would be important in this job? Is there a job you wouldn't want to do?

How important are these?

Not important

Very important

Having a job that

helps others	1	2	3	4	5
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Having a job that

is interesting	1	2	3	4	5
-----------------------	---	---	---	---	---

Having a job where

I learn new things	1	2	3	4	5
---------------------------	---	---	---	---	---

Having a job where

I achieve things	1	2	3	4	5
-------------------------	---	---	---	---	---

Having a job where

I am in control	1	2	3	4	5
------------------------	---	---	---	---	---

Having a stable job

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

Having a well-paid

job	1	2	3	4	5
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Working with

people I like	1	2	3	4	5
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Those they have mentioned/rated highly – why are they important?

- If you won the lottery and had enough money to live on without working would you still want to work?

[if time/appropriate narrative questions on past offending, future goals, desires/fears etc.]

B.4 Interview schedule – Green Light Employees 6 months

The [GL]

How's the work been going?

1. What's the best thing about it?
2. What's the worst?
3. Did you get a qualification when you were at the [GL]?

What qualification? Will it come in useful?

4. What have you learnt from being at the [GL]?

Job skills?

5. What motivated you not to drop out?
6. Do you think you've changed at all in the 6 months? What's made you change?

Peers

7. Who do you get on best with in the group? Why?
8. Will you keep in touch with any of the people after the [GL] ends?

Life outside of work

9. What do you do in the evenings? What do you do on the weekend?

10. What sort of things do you spend your money on?
Do you spend it all at once?

11. Has the [GL] effected how much time you spend with friends?

12. Has working at the [GL] affected your relationship with your family?

Offending

So why did you first get involved in crime?

What happened in your most recent offence?

13. How do you feel about it now?

14. Since starting the [GL] have you reoffended/been arrested/run-ins with police etc.?

Have you done anything you weren't caught for?

15. What's making you stop getting in trouble with police?

Have you made a choice to stop?

Why do you want to stop?

16. Has being part of the [GL] helped you to stay out of trouble? How?

17. Do you think you'll get in trouble with the police in the future? Is there anything that might lead you to reoffend?

18. What do you think x or y would think of you if you...

- Stole a piece of equipment from the [GL]?
- Got in a fight? Where someone was injured?

Future Plans

19. What are you going to do after you finish the [GL]?

Future goals?

20. Do you feel you can make this happen? *Is there anything that might stand in your way? Fears?*

B.5 Interview schedule – Green Light Employees 12 months

1. So what have you been up to since you left the [GL]?
 - a. Have you done any employment/training/education since leaving the [GL]?
 - b. Are you now in employment? What are they doing (is it meaningful work)?
How's it going? If not in employment - why not?
 - c. Have you reoffended since you've left the [GL]?
2. Do you think you've benefitted from doing the [GL]? How?
3. Do you still see any of the other [GL] employees? Do you still see the supervisor?
4. Future plans?
 - a. Employment?
 - b. Do you think you'll reoffend?
5. Where would you like to be in 5 years time? Fears?

B.6 Interview schedule – Green Light Supervisors

[GL] recruitment

1. How do you recruit young people for the [GL]? On what basis do you choose young people?

Why do they want to do it?

Experiences at the [GL]

2. How do you think being part of the [GL] benefits young people?
3. Are there any drawbacks to the [GL]?
4. How have this cohort engaged with the work?
5. What type of work did they engage best in?
6. Has (x) changed throughout their six months at the [GL]?
7. Did young people get a qualification whilst they are at the [GL]?

[GL] and desistance

8. Does involvement in the [GL] help young people to give up crime?

How?

9. Do you think any employment would have gotten these young people to stay away from crime or is there something particular about the [GL]?

Young people describe having done many previous jobs/training – is there anything unique about the [GL]?

10. Does the [GL] have an effect on how young people see themselves?

11. Do the friendships at the [GL] aid desistance at all?

12. What distinguishes those the [GL] will work for from those it will not?

13. Do you think any of this cohort are still engaging in any criminal activities?

When did they stop?

Future plans

14. After the [GL] - do you think (x) will get back involved in crime? Why?

15. Who out of (x) do you think will find work?

16. How much help are young people given after the completion of the [GL]?

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